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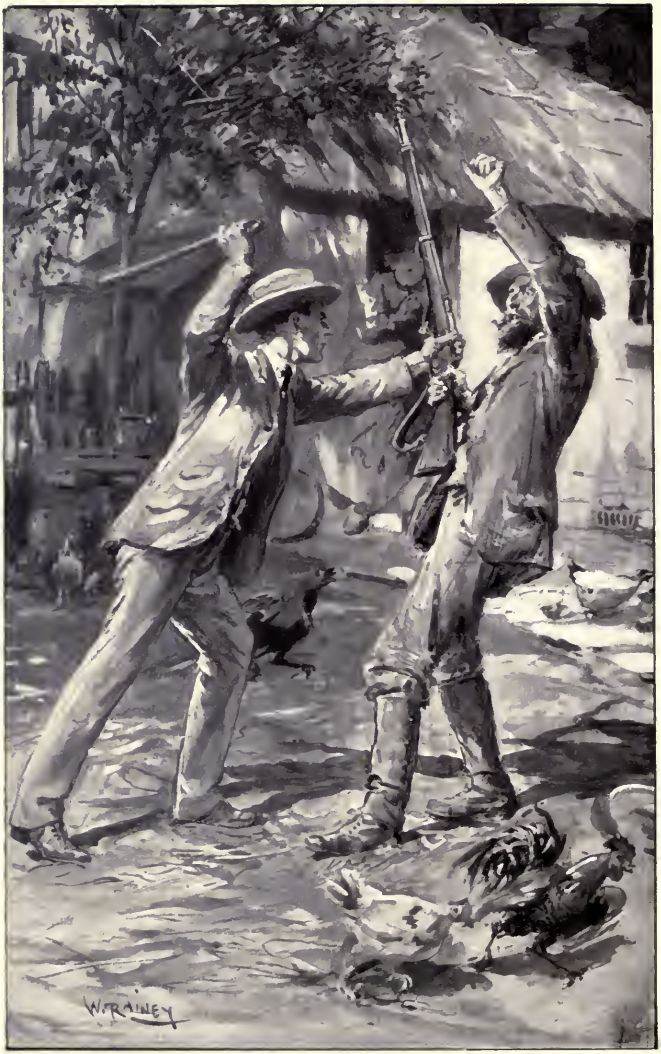

M 683

"CHRIS SPRANG AT HIM"

WITH BULLER IN NATAL

OR, A BORN LEADER

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BY

G. A. HENTY

Author of "In the Irish Brigade" "Beric the Briton" "With Cochrane the Dauntless" "The Dash for Khartoum" &c.

WITH TEN ILLUSTRATIONS BY W. RAINEY, R.I., AND A MAP

LONDON
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1901

PREFACE

It will be a long time before the story of the late war can be written fully and impartially. Even among the narratives of those who witnessed the engagements there are many differences and discrepancies, as is necessarily the case when the men who write are in different parts of the field. Until, then, the very meagre military despatches are supplemented by much fuller details, anything like an accurate history of the war would be impossible. I have, however, endeavoured to reconcile the various narratives of the fighting in Natal, and to make the account of the military occurrences as clear as possible. Fortunately this is not a history, but a story, to which the war forms the background, and, as is necessary in such a case, it is the heroes of my tale, the little band of lads from Johannesburg, rather than the leaders of the British troops, who are the most conspicuous characters in the narrative. As these, although possessed of many admirable qualities, had not the faculty of being at two places at once, I was obliged to confine the action of the story to Natal. With the doings of the main army I hope to deal next year.

G. A. HENTY.

CONTENTS

CHAP.		Page
I.	The Bursting of the Storm	11
II.	A Terrible Journey	30
III.	At the Front	50
IV.	Dundee	70
V.	The First Battle	89
VI.	Elandslaagte	108
VII.	Ladysmith Besieged	128
VIII.	A Desperate Project	146
IX.	Komati-poort	164
X.	An Explosion	183
XI.	Back with the Army	201
XII.	The Battle of Colenso	222
XIII.	Prisoners	239
XIV.	Spion Kop	259
XV.	Spion Kop	278
XVI.	A Colonist's Adventure	297
XVII.	A Rescue	316
XVIII.	Railway Hill	334
XIX.	Majuba Day	351
XX.	Ladysmith	369

ILLUSTRATIONS

Page

"Chris sprang at him" . . . . . *Frontis.* 39

Chris offers his Services to Sir Penn Symons 64

Chris and his Companions Scouting 94

"Both rifles cracked at once" 142

"There was a tremendous roar and a blinding crash" . 190

"With a shout of triumph the two Boers ran down" . . 243

"Presently from behind the foot of the hill six horsemen dashed out" 264

The Naval Guns on Mount Alice 278

"One of the Boers held up his rifle with a white flag tied to it" 330

The Relief of Ladysmith 372

Map of South-Eastern Africa 48

WITH BULLER IN NATAL

CHAPTER I

THE BURSTING OF THE STORM

A GROUP of excited men were gathered in front of the Stock Exchange at Johannesburg. It was evident that something altogether unusual had happened. All wore anxious and angry expressions, but a few shook hands with each other, as if the news that so much agitated them, although painful, was yet welcome; and indeed this was so.

For months a war-cloud had hung over the town, but it had been thought that it might pass over without bursting. None imagined that the blow would come so suddenly, and when it fell it had all the force of a complete surprise, although it had been so threatening for many weeks that a considerable portion of the population had already fled. It was true that great numbers of men, well armed and with large numbers of cannon, had been moving south, but negotiations were still going on and might continue for some time yet; and now by the folly and arrogance of one man the cloud had burst, and in thirty hours war would begin.

Similar though smaller groups were gathered here and there in the streets. Parties of Boers from the country round rode up and down with an air of insolent triumph, some of them

shouting "We shall soon be rid of you; in another month there will not be a rooinek left in South Africa."

Those addressed paid no heed to the words. They had heard the same thing over and over again for the past two months. There was a tightening of the lips and a closing of the fingers as if on a sword or rifle, but no one replied to the insolent taunts. For years it had been the hope of the Uitlanders that this would come, and that there would be an end to a position that was well-nigh intolerable. Never before had a large body of intelligent men been kept in a state of abject subjection by an inferior race, a race almost without even the elements of civilization, ignorant and brutal beyond any existing white community, and superior only in the fact that they were organized and armed, whereas those they trampled upon were deficient in both these respects. Having no votes, these were powerless to better their condition by the means common to civilized communities throughout the world. They were ground down by an enormous taxation, towards which the Boers themselves contributed practically nothing, and the revenue drawn from them was spent in the purchase of munitions of war, artillery, and fortifications, so enormously beyond the needs of the country that it was no secret that they were intended not only for the defence of the republic against invasion, but for a general rising of the Boer population and the establishment of Dutch supremacy throughout the whole of South Africa.

The Boer government was corrupt from the highest to the lowest. The president and the members of his family piled up wealth to an enormous amount, and nothing could be done without wholesale bribery. The price of everything connected

with the mining industry was doubled by the supply being in the hands of monopolists, who shared their gains with high state officials. Money was lavished like water on what was called secret service, in subsidizing newspapers to influence public opinion throughout Europe, and, as it was strongly suspected, in carrying on a propaganda among the Dutch in Cape Colony, and in securing the return of members and a ministry secretly pledged to further in every way the aims of the Presidents of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State. The British and other aliens were not only deprived of all rights of citizenship, but even freedom of speech and the right of public meeting were denied them; they were not allowed to carry arms except by a special license, their children were taught in Dutch in the schools, they had no right of trial by jury; judges who had the courage to refuse to carry out the illegal behests of the president were deprived of their offices, and the few editors of newspapers representing the Uitlanders—as all men not born in the state were called—were imprisoned and their journals suppressed.

Intolerable as was such a state of things to a civilized community, it might have been borne with some patience had it not been that the insolence of their masters was unbounded. Every Boer seemed to take a pleasure in neglecting no opportunity of showing his contempt for the men whose enterprise and labour had enormously enriched the country, and whose superior intelligence he was too grossly ignorant to appreciate. A Boer farmer would refuse a cup of water to a passing traveller, and would enforce his refusal by producing his rifle immediately if the stranger ventured to urge his request. Of late the insolence of the Boers had greatly

increased; the manner in which England had, instead of demanding justice with the sternness and determination that the circumstances called for, permitted her remonstrances to be simply ignored, was put down as a consciousness of weakness. And having now collected arms sufficient not only for themselves but for the whole Dutch population of South Africa, the Boers were convinced that their hour of triumph had come, and that in a very short time their flag would float over every public building throughout the country and the Union Jack disappear for ever.

The long discussions that had been going on with regard to a five or seven years' franchise were regarded with absolute indifference by the Uitlanders—even the shorter time would have afforded them no advantage whatever. The members from the mining districts would be in a hopeless minority in the assembly; and indeed, very few of those entitled to a vote would have cared to claim it, inasmuch as they would thereby render themselves citizens of the republic, and be liable to be commandeered and called upon to serve in arms, not only against the natives, upon whom the Boers were always making aggressions, but against England, when the war, which all foresaw could not long be delayed, broke out.

For months the negotiations went on between President Kruger and Mr. Chamberlain, the British colonial minister, and the certainty that the Boers were bent upon fighting became more and more evident. Vast quantities of rifles, ammunition, and cannon poured into the Transvaal, their passage being more than winked at by the Dutch ministry of Cape Colony.

It was that day known that President Kruger had thrown

off the mask of a pretended desire for peace, and that an ultimatum had been telegraphed to England couched in terms of such studied insolence that it was certain war must ensue. The greatest civilized power on earth would have shown less arrogance towards the most feeble. Not only was England called upon to send no more troops to South Africa, but to withdraw most of her forces already in the country, and this by a state that owed its very existence to her, and whose total population was not more than that of a small English county.

The terms of that ultimatum had just become known in Johannesburg, and it was not surprising that it had created an intense excitement. All had long felt that war must come, and that at an early date, but the step that had now been taken came as a surprise. From all appearances it had seemed that the negotiations might be continued for months yet before the crisis arrived; and that it should thus have been forced on by the wording of the ultimatum showed that the Boers were satisfied that their preparations were complete, and that they were in a position to overrun Natal and Cape Colony before any British force capable of withstanding them could arrive. England, indeed, had been placed in a most difficult position. The ministry were not unaware of the enormous preparations that the Boers were making, and had for some time past been quietly sending out a large number of officers and a few non-commissioned officers and men to the Cape. But so long as there was a hope that the Boers would finally grant some redress to the Uitlanders, they could not despatch any considerable number of troops, for had they done so they would have been accused, not only on the Continent, but by a section of Englishmen, of forcing on a war

with a weak state, whereas in point of fact the war was being forced on by a country that most erroneously believed itself to be stronger than England. The Boers of the Transvaal knew already that the Orange Free State would join them at once, and believed firmly that every Dutchman in Natal and Cape Colony would at the signal take up arms.

Presently a gentleman detached himself from the crowd in front of the Exchange, and joined a lad of some sixteen years old who was standing on the other side of the street.

"Well, father, is it all true what they say?" the latter asked—"that Kruger has sent such an ultimatum to England that war is certain?"

"It is quite true, Chris; war is absolutely certain. Kruger has given the British Government only two days to reply to the most insolent demand ever addressed to a great power, and worded in the most offensive manner. I imagine that no reply will be given; and as the ultimatum was sent off yesterday, we shall to-morrow morning be in a state of war."

"Well, father, there is no doubt what the result will be."

"No doubt whatever as to the final result, but I am afraid things will go very badly for a time. I am glad, very glad, that Kruger should have sent such an ultimatum. It cannot but be accepted as a defiance by all England; and I should say that even the opposition, which has of late continually attacked Mr. Chamberlain, will now be silenced, and that Government will be supported by all parties."

After a quarter of an hour's walk they arrived at home. It was a handsome house, for Mr. King was one of the leading men in Johannesburg. He had come out with a wife and son ten years before, being sent by some London capitalists to

report to them fully upon the prospects of the gold-fields. Under his advice they had purchased several properties, which had been brought out as companies, and proved extremely valuable. He was himself a large holder in each of these, and acted as manager and director of the group.

"What is the news, Robert?" his wife asked, as he and her son came in. "I have had three or four visitors in here, and they all say that there is quite an excitement in the town."

"It has come at last," he said gravely; "war is inevitable, and will begin in twenty-four hours. Kruger has sent one of the most extraordinary demands ever drawn up. He calls upon England to cease sending out troops, and to speedily recall most of those now in South Africa, and has given two days for a reply, of which one has already expired. As it is absolutely certain that England will not grant this modest request, we may say that the war has begun. I wish now that I had sent you and Chris down to Durban a fortnight ago, for there will be a fearful rush, and, judging by the attitude of the Boers, I fear they will make the journey a very unpleasant one. As we have agreed, it is absolutely necessary that I should remain here. There is no saying what steps the Boers will take with reference to the mines; but it is certain that we must, if possible, keep them going—not for the sake of the profit, which you may be sure Kruger will not allow to go out of the country, but because if they were to be stopped it would cost an immense deal of money to put them in working condition again, especially if, as is likely enough, the Boers damage the machinery. I shall do as little work as I can; and the Boers will not, I fancy, interfere with us as long as they can benefit by the working. For myself, I

would risk any loss or damage rather than aid in supplying them with gold, but for the sake of our shareholders in Europe I must do my best to save the mines from destruction. Indeed, if I don't work them, probably they will do so until the end is at hand, and will then do as much damage as possible. You know we have agreed on this point."

"Yes, I suppose it is best, Robert; but it seems terrible leaving you alone here, and I shall be in a perpetual state of anxiety about you."

"I don't think there is any occasion for that; as long as I am working the mines and they are taking the gold, which no doubt they will have to repay when our army are masters here, they will not interfere with me. They treat us badly enough, as we know; but they love the gold even more than they hate us, so I have no fear whatever as to my personal safety. I am afraid, dear, that for a time things will go very badly with us. Already we know that commandos have gone forward in great strength to the frontier, and I should not be surprised if the whole of South Africa rises; at any rate, the Boers are confident that it will be so. Gladstone's miserable surrender after our disasters at Laing's Nek and Majuba have puffed them up with such an idea of their own fighting powers and our weakness, that I believe they think they are going to have almost a walk over. Still, though it was certain that we should have a hard time whenever war came, we have been hoping for years that England would at last interfere to obtain redress for us, and we must not grumble now that what we have been so long expecting has at last come to pass. I believe there will be some stern fighting. The Boers are no cowards; courage is, indeed, as far as I know, the only virtue

they possess. In the long run they must certainly be beaten, but it will only be after very hard fighting."

"What do you think they will do, father?"

"I can't say what they will do, but I am sure that what they ought to do is to merely hold the passes from Natal with enough men for the purpose, and to march their whole force, broken up into half a dozen columns, into Cape Colony. There is no force there that could resist them, they would be undoubtedly joined by every Dutchman there, and I am convinced that the Africander ministry would at once declare for them, in which case England would have to undertake the tremendous work of conquering the whole of South Africa afresh, for certainly she could not allow it to slip from her hands, even if it should prove as stern a business as the conquering of half India after the Sepoy Mutiny. Now to business. Fortunately we sent down your clothes and everything we had of any value to our friends the Wilsons, at Durban, six weeks ago. What you have remaining you must leave behind to take its chance. You will be able to take no luggage whatever with you. We know how terribly the trains have been packed for the past fortnight, and a week ago almost all the carriages were commandeered for the use of the troops going south.

"You must take with you a basket of provisions, sufficient, if necessary, for two or three days for you both. There is no saying how long you may be on your way to the frontier; once beyond that you will, of course, be able to obtain anything you want. But you need expect no civility or courtesy from the Boers, who, indeed, would feel a malicious pleasure in shunting you off into a siding, and letting you wait there

for any number of hours. You must mind, Chris, above all things, to keep your temper, whatever may happen. You know how our people have been insulted, and actually maltreated in scores of cases, and in their present state of excitement the Boers would be only too glad to find an excuse for acts of violence. I was speaking to you about it three days ago, and I cannot impress it too strongly upon you. I have already given you permission to join one or other of the corps that are being raised in Natal, and if anything unpleasant occurs on the road, you must bottle up your feelings and wait till you get a rifle in your hand and stand on equal terms with them."

"I promise that, father. I think, after what we have had to put up with here, during the past two or three months especially, I can bear anything for these last few days."

"Yes, Chris; but it will be more trying now that you have your mother under your charge. It is for her sake as well as your own that I impress this so strongly upon you. Now, will you go down at once to the railway-station and enquire about the trains? I shall go myself to the manager and see whether I can get him to make any special arrangement in your mother's favour, though I have no great hopes of that; for though I know him well, he is, like all these Dutchmen in office, an uncivilized brute puffed up with his own importance."

Chris started at once, and returned an hour later with a very discouraging report. The station was crowded with people. No regular trains were running, but while he was there a large number of cattle-trucks had been run up to the platform, and in these as many of the fugitives as could be packed in were stowed away. As soon as this was done the

train had started, but not half the number collected on the platform had found room in it. His father had left a few minutes after him, and presently returned.

"From what I can hear," he said, "there is no chance whatever of your being able to get any accommodation, but must take your chance with the others. Viljoen told me that except the waggons there was not a carriage of any sort or class left here, and that there was no saying at all when any would return; but that even if they did, they would be taken for the use of the troops going south. All he could say was, that if, when I came down to the station with you, he is there, he will see that you go by the first waggons that leave."

"That is something at least," Mrs. King said quietly. "I certainly do not wish to ask for any favour from these people, and do not want to be better off than others. I have no doubt that it will be an unpleasant time, but after all it will be nothing to what great numbers of people will have to suffer during the war."

"That is so, Amy. And now I think that the sooner the start is made the better. The rush to get away will increase every hour, and we shall have the miners coming in in hundreds. Many of the mines will be shut down at once, though some of them will, like ours, continue operations as long as they are allowed to."

"Make your basket, or bag, or whatever you take your provisions in, as small as possible, mother. I saw lots of baggage left behind on the platform. You see, there are no seats to stow things under. I should say that a flat box which you can sit on would be the best thing. And you will want your warmest cloak and a thick rug for night."

"I have a box that will do very well, Chris. Fortunately we have plenty of cold meat and bread in the house. I shall not be more than half an hour, Robert."

In less than that time the party were ready. Chris's preparations had been of the simplest. He carried over his arm a long, thick greatcoat, in the pocket of which he had thrust a fur cap and two woollen comforters. He had also a light but warm rug, for he thought it probable that he might not be able to be next to his mother. He had on his usual light tweed suit, but had, in addition, put on a cardigan waistcoat, which he intended to take off when once in the train. In his pockets he had a couple of packets of tobacco, for although he seldom smoked, he thought that some of it might be very acceptable to his fellow-passengers before the journey was over. He wore a light-gray, broad-brimmed wide-awake, with a white silk puggaree twisted round it, for the heat of the sun in the middle of the day was already very great, and would be greater still when they got down to Natal. The box, which a Kaffir servant put on his shoulder, was about eight inches deep and a foot wide, and eighteen inches long.

"What have you in it, mother?"

"Two tin bottles of cold tea, each holding a gallon."

"I should hardly have thought that we wanted as much as that."

"No, but there may be many women who have made no provision at all, thinking that we shall at least be able to get water at any of the stations we stop at. I have a small tin mug, and that joint of meat; the rest of the box is filled up with bread-and-butter. I have cut it up and spread it, so

that it packs a good deal closer than it would do if we put the loaves in whole."

Mr. King had his wife's thick-wadded winter cloak and a rug over his arm, and a small hand-bag with a few necessaries for the journey. Mrs. King was in her usual attire, and carried only a white umbrella.

"We look as if we were starting for a picnic rather than a journey that will last three or four days," she said with an attempt at gaiety. "There is one comfort, we shall have nothing to look after when we get to the end."

Chris walked on ahead to let his father and mother talk together, for although all arrangements had been discussed and settled during the past two or three days, there was much they had to say to each other now that the parting had come. The lad was a fine specimen of the young Uitlander. A life passed largely in the open air, hard work and exercise, had broadened his shoulders and made him look at least a year older than he really was. He was a splendid rider and an excellent shot with his rifle, for his father had obtained a permit from the authorities for him to carry one, and he could bring down an antelope when running at full speed as neatly as any of the young Boers. Four days a week he had spent in the mines, for his father intended him to follow in his footsteps, and he had worked by turns with the miners below and the engineers on the surface, so that he might in the course of a few years be thoroughly acquainted with all the details of his profession.

The last two days in each week he had to himself, and with three or four lads of his own age went for long rides in search of sport. A couple of hours every evening were spent in study

under his father's direction. He was quiet in manner, and talked but little. He deeply resented the position in which the British population in the Transvaal were placed, the insolence of the Boers towards them, and their brutal cruelty towards the natives. The restraint which he so often found it necessary to exercise had had no slight influence on his character, and had given a certain grim expression to the naturally bright face. Many had been the discussions between him and his friends as to the prospect of England's taking up their cause. Their disappointment had been intense at the miserable failure of the Jameson raid, which, however, they felt, and rightly, must some day have a good result, inasmuch as it had brought out the wretched position of the Uitlanders, who, though forming the majority of the population, and the source of all the wealth of the country, and paying all the taxes, were yet treated as an outcast race, and deprived of every right possessed by people of all civilized nations.

They had wondered and fretted at the apathy with which the enormous warlike preparations of the Boers were regarded at home, and the fact that they were permitted to become a formidable power, capable of offering a desperate resistance even to the armies of England; whereas, before they had been enriched by the industry and enterprise of the immigrants, they had been in danger of being altogether wiped out by the Zulus and Swazis, and had only been saved by the interference on their behalf of the British power. Thus, then, while the war-cloud had been slowly but surely gathering, the lads had watched the approaching crisis with delight, unmingled with the anxiety and foreboding of the capitalists, who, without doubting what the end must be, were sure that enormous

losses and sacrifices must result before their deliverance from Boer oppression could be obtained.

The scene at the station was an extraordinary one. Men, women, and children of all ranks were crowded on the platform; the greater capitalists, the men whose fortunes could be counted by hundreds of thousands, had for the most part left, but many who in England would be considered as rich men had remained in the town till the last moment, to make their final arrangements and wind up their affairs. With these were well-to-do store-keepers, with their wives and families, together with mining officials, miners, and mechanics of all kinds. Piles of baggage rendered movement difficult, for many had supposed that the regular trains were still running, and that they would be able to carry away with them the greater portion of their belongings. The scenes at the departure of the previous trains roughly awakened them to the fact that all this must be abandoned, and women were crying and men cursing below their breath at this last evidence of Boer indifference to the sufferings of those by whose work they had so greatly benefited. Mr. King soon found that the manager was still there, but on speaking to him he shrugged his shoulders and said:

"I do not see what I can do. Look at the crowd there. When the waggons come up there will be a rush, and I have no men here to keep such a number in order."

"I see that, Mr. Viljoen, but if you would send a man with us to where the waggons are standing in readiness to come up, my wife could take her place then."

"Yes, I will do that at once. You had better go with her outside the station, and the porter shall take you on from

there. If you were to get off the platform here and walk up the lines, others would notice it, and there would be an immediate rush."

He called to one of the porters on the platform and gave him instructions, and in a few minutes Mrs. King was seated on her box in the corner of a truck, which, with a few others, had a covered roof, although it was entirely open at the sides. In the next half-hour eight or ten others, who had been similarly favoured by the manager, joined them. All these were known to the Kings, and it was a great relief to them to find that they would travel together, instead of being mixed up with the general crowd. They had packed themselves together as closely as possible, so that when the train became crowded there should be no room for anyone to push in among them. Among the party was John Cairns, a great chum of Chris's. He and his father and mother had been waiting for two hours at the station, and he told him that there were seven or eight of their companions there.

"We will take our seats on that side," Chris said, "and as we move in shout to them to join us. It will be a great thing to get as many people we know in here as possible."

Presently the train began to move. Fortunately, at the spot where it drew up, a group of their acquaintances were clustered together, and these all managed to get into the truck, which was speedily filled up until there was scarce standing-room. Three minutes later the train moved on. A great number were left behind, although everyone made as much room as possible, women especially being helped in after the trucks seemed absolutely choke-full. As soon as the train was fairly in motion many of the men climbed up on to the

roofs of the covered waggons, thereby relieving the pressure below, and enabling all the women to sit down. Others ranged themselves along the sides, sitting on the rail, and so minimizing the space they occupied. But even with all this, the women were packed inconveniently together. All, however, were so much pleased at their good fortune in having got away that there was no complaining or grumbling. That the journey would be a long one, all knew; but at least they had started, and would soon be a free people in a free country. Chris and his friends had been among the first to climb up on to the roof, and they sat down in a group at one end of it.

"It is going to be pretty cold here to-night, and desperately hot to-morrow," Chris said; "but we can put up with that. I would stand it for a month rather than stop any longer among these brutes."

There was a general murmur of agreement.

"Thank heavens," one of them said, "the next time we meet them will be with arms in our hands. We have a long score to pay off, and we shall, I expect, have plenty of chances. The Boers are boasting that they will soon drive the last Englishman out of South Africa, and seem to regard it as a sort of general picnic. They will find out their mistake before they have done."

"Still, we must not think that it is going to be a picnic our way," Chris said. "They have quite made up their minds that every Boer in Cape Colony and Natal will join them at once. If they do, it will be a very long business to put them down, though I have no doubt it will all come right in the end. Do you know anything about the others?"

"I know that Peters and Carmichael and Brown went off

with their people last night, but I don't know about the others."

"Capper and Wildesden and Horrocks went yesterday," another lad said. "Sankey and Holdsworth were on the platform, and no doubt got into another truck."

"There are seven of us here," Chris said, "and as six have gone on, that makes thirteen certain, and there are eight more to come. Most of us will stop at Pietermaritzburg, but I suppose some, whose friends are going straight home, will go down with them to Durban."

"There will not be many who have to do so," another said. "Sankey's people and Carmichael's are going to Cape Town, but, so far as I know, all the others will stay and see it out either at Maritzburg or Durban. Do you think that we should take any others in with us, Chris?"

"I don't think so. You see we all know each other, and it would be a nuisance having fellows with us of whom we know nothing. They might not pull with us, while we have been so much together that there is no fear of our having any disagreement. I think we have all pretty well settled that it will be much better to act by ourselves, instead of joining any of the corps that are sure to be formed down there. Still, if we knew one of the men getting up a corps —and some of our people are pretty sure to do so—I do think it would be a good plan to join, if they would accept us as a sort of independent troop, ready to act with them when there is any big fighting, and to go about on our own account at other times. You see, none of us will want any pay. We shall all furnish our own horses and arms, and shall therefore be on a different footing from men who have to draw pay and

be equipped at the public expense; and I don't see why any officer commanding a troop in one of these corps should object to our joining him on those terms. But anyhow, I feel sure that we should be able to do a great deal more good by being free to move where we liked, and to undertake expeditions on our own account, than if we were to act in a more regular manner."

There was a general chorus of agreement.

"Now, how long do you think it will be before we cross Laing's Nek? Of course we ought to be there by to-morrow morning. It is only a hundred and fifty miles, and at fifteen miles an hour, which is about their usual rate of travelling, we should cross the frontier at two o'clock, for it was about four when we started. But there is no saying. My father thought we ought to take four days' provisions with us; I think we could hold out for that time."

"You don't mean to say, Chris, he thought it possible we might be as long as that?"

"He did think so, Peters. He considered that we might be shunted off very often to let trains with men and stores for the troops go on ahead of us."

"Well," the other replied, "I don't care so much for myself, though I don't say that it would be lively to be stuck up here for four days and nights, but it would be awful for the women; and I should say that very few of them have got more than enough provisions for a day. Still, of course, if we are shunted at a station we shall be able to buy things."

"I am not so sure of that," Chris said. "You know what the Boers are at their best; and now that they believe the time has arrived when they are going to be the absolute

lords of all South Africa, they are so puffed up that there is no saying what they may not do to show their hatred and contempt for us. And whatever happens, you fellows, you must keep your temper. My father spoke to me very strongly about it. You must remember that they will not mind what they do, and would shoot any of us down on the smallest excuse, knowing well enough that we are helpless, and that it is unlikely any enquiry would ever be made, or anyone punished, even if they shot a dozen of us. We must remember that we intend to pay off old scores later on, and that we mean to do it with interest."

CHAPTER II

A TERRIBLE JOURNEY

TWENTY-FOUR hours had gone, and not half the distance had yet been covered. The night had passed painfully to all those in the waggons, for though most of the women had provided themselves with wraps of one sort or another, the cold was severe. This, however, was less felt than the cramped position in which all had to sit on the floor, unable to move or to stretch their legs, the only change obtainable being by standing up. The pressure was most felt in the open waggons, where the men as well as the women were packed together so closely that even sitting down was impossible. Some slight relief had been afforded by the men on the covered waggons taking as many from the uncovered trucks as could lie down there with them; but as the latter were by far the more

numerous, a comparatively small number of men could be so entertained.

For a time the rising of the sun afforded some relief, but as it gained in power the position of the fugitives became almost unbearable. The stoppages were frequent, and at all the stations the Boers from the neighbourhood had assembled, some from curiosity, but the majority to wait for the trains that were to take them to the front. Although sometimes detained for three or four hours, the passengers were not allowed to alight. The men, indeed, at times, by common impulse, sprang out, but were soon forced to take their places again, some of the Boers using their heavy whips over their heads and shoulders, while others with pointed guns prevented any attempt at retaliation. Men, and even women, crowded the platform, jeering and cursing those in the waggons, menacing them with their whips, and snatching at such trinkets, and even cloaks, as took their fancy. The men were all several times searched for weapons, and made to turn their pockets inside out, the contents being unceremoniously transferred to those of the Boers. Chris and his companions would have taken their places below with their friends, but these implored them not to do so, being afraid that they would be enraged beyond endurance, and might in their anger say or do something that would give an excuse to the Boers to use their rifles, which they so often pointed threateningly at women as well as men. It was only when the train was in motion that food and drink were passed up from below, as these too would assuredly, had they been seen, have been confiscated by the brutal tormentors.

When they steamed into Standerton in the afternoon, the

distress of the women and children for water was so great that men determined at all costs to endeavour to get some for them. As if by one impulse, when the train came to a standstill outside the station, they jumped out and made for the little village. But here all refused to give or sell them water or food, and in a few minutes a large party of Boers rode in, and, falling upon them with their whips, drove them back to the train. Had they been armed the men would assuredly have resisted till the last, although certain to be killed, so mad were they with passion. As it was, it would have been throwing away their lives without a chance of even avenging themselves on their assailants. As they reached the waggons and climbed into their places again, several had broad blue weals across their faces, while many more were smarting from the cuts they had received on the body. Chris and his companions had got out when the others did so, but had not followed them. Their supply of water and cold tea was not yet exhausted, as most of the ladies had made preparations for a journey of two or three days, and Mrs. King and the mothers of the other lads begged them not to go.

"The Boers are only waiting for an excuse to use their fire-arms," Mrs. King said, "and whatever happens you had better stay here. You can do no good by going."

So, reluctantly, they had again taken their places on the roofs of the carriages, and sat there with their pulses beating and their fists clenched as they heard the shouts and the cracking of the heavy whips in the village, and presently saw the men running back, pursued by their cowardly assailants. Two or three of the lads were so enraged at the sight that they would have jumped down had not Chris laid a restraining hand on them.

"Wait your time," he said in a hard voice. "We can't repay them now, but we will remember this when our turn comes."

The Boers, as they rode up, leapt from their horses, and with shouts of exultation walked along the waggons, striking at the men, hurling every epithet of contempt and hatred at them, and even spitting at them. Many of the women were also struck, as well as being grossly insulted.

"And these scoundrels call themselves Christian men, and their friends speak of them as simple pious farmers! I call them, both from their appearance and their actions, as unmitigated a set of ruffians as are to be found on the face of the globe," Cairns exclaimed passionately.

They were indeed as unsavoury in appearance as they were brutal in manner. Water is scarce in the Transvaal, and is used most sparingly for all purposes of cleanliness. The Boer sleeps in his clothes, gives himself a shake when he gets up, and his toilet is completed, unless on very exceptional occasions, when he goes outside the door to the water-cask, fills his hands with water, and rubs them over his face.

Four times in the year, however, the Boers indulge in a general wash before starting with their wives and families for four or five days' stay at the nearest town, to attend the services of the church and to do their quarter's marketing.

In dress the Boer is almost universally slovenly, his clothes hang about him stained and discoloured by long usage. In the majority of cases he is altogether without education, and very many Boers are scarcely able to sign their names. Most of them wear beards and long unkempt hair. But in point of physique they are fine men, tall and powerfully, though

loosely, built, capable of standing great fatigue if necessary, although averse to all exercise save on horseback. All are taught to shoot from boyhood, and even the women in the country districts are trained in the use of firearms, for it is not so long since they lived in dread of incursions by the Zulus and Swazis.

There was no attempt whatever at uniformity of dress. Most of the men wore high riding-boots. Some of the young men from the towns were in tweed suits, the vast majority wore either shooting-jackets or long loose coats; some were in straw hats, but the elder men all wore large felt hats with wide brims. They were all, however, similarly armed with rifles of the best and most modern construction. Their general appearance was that of a large band of farmers of the roughest type and wholly without regard for their personal appearance.

It was fully an hour before the train moved again. Then it was shunted on to a siding while the Boers entrained with their horses on a long line of waggons which had just come up, and which started on its way south as soon as they were on board. Then the emigrant train crawled on again. There was another night of wretchedness, and in the morning they arrived at Volksrust, the frontier town. Here they were again closely searched for arms, and what provisions remained among them were commandeered, or, as the emigrants called it, stolen. However, they knew that their troubles were now nearly over, and did not grumble when they were informed that the train would go no farther, and that they must make their way on foot to Newcastle.

They were told tauntingly that they might find some of

their friends there if they had not already run away, and that if they stopped at Pietermaritzburg for a week they would have another journey down to Durban as prisoners. All were too glad to get out of the clutches of the Boers to utter complaints which they knew would be useless, and they went off at once. The prospect was not, however, a pleasant one. Newcastle was nearly thirty miles away, but they hoped that at least they might obtain shelter and rest and food for the women at some of the scattered farms. At first their progress was slow, for after being for more than two days and a half packed up like cattle, they had almost lost the use of their limbs; but gradually the pace was accelerated. Men took the little children on their shoulders, others helped the women along. Charlestown, on the British side of the frontier, was already occupied by the Boers, who hooted and abused them as they passed through. At Laing's Nek there was a Dutch commando with some guns.

Two miles on, the women could go no farther, and they halted at a large farmhouse which had been deserted by its owners. All the men, however, who were alone, determined to push on at once to Newcastle, and promised they would send vehicles of some sort to take them on if they could possibly be obtained. Mrs. King and the other ladies authorized them to pay any sums demanded.

Thankful indeed were the tired women when they reached the farmhouse. They found the doors unfastened, as the farmer knew that were he to lock them the Boers would certainly batter them in when they arrived, and would probably do greater damage to the furniture left behind than if they had obtained an entry without trouble. The men soon found the

wood-shed, and in a short time great fires blazed in every room. The bedding had been carried away, but, utterly worn out as they were, the women were only too glad to lie down on rugs and cover themselves with their cloaks. The men gathered in the lower room and talked for some time before thinking of going to sleep. There was scarce one who was not determined to join one of the volunteer corps being raised at Durban and Maritzburg, and to avenge the insults and ill-treatment to which they had been subjected. The long-smouldering animosity towards the Boers had been fanned during the past three days into a fierce fire, and even those who had not before thought of taking part in the struggle were now as eager as the others to do so.

In the morning all were astir early. Had they been supplied with food they would have waited until waggons came out from Newcastle, but these could hardly arrive until evening, and at any moment the Boer advance might commence. They therefore determined to move on early, for if they met the waggons half-way these could return with them at once to the town. It was desirable to start as soon as possible so as to get well on the way before the heat of the day was at its fullest. Accordingly by six all were in movement. The long night's rest had done them good, still more so the thought that by the end of the day they would be among friends, and they were disposed to laugh and joke over their present situation. All the men had cut themselves heavy cudgels from the stock of firewood, and the fact that they were not, as before, wholly defenceless was no slight gratification to them. Even the ladies spoke confidently of being able to walk the twenty miles to Newcastle should they not meet

vehicles coming to fetch them. They could go ten miles now and then halt till the sun was setting, and after such a long rest could certainly go on to Newcastle.

"I am afraid, mother," Chris said as they started, "that what seems so easy now will be too much for many of the women. We started without breakfast, and unless we can get something by the way I doubt if many will reach the town to-night. Of course for the men it is nothing. Very often when I have been out on the veldt and have started early, I have had nothing till I got back late in the evening. What are you wearing that veil for, mother? I saw that you pulled it down over your face yesterday afternoon. I suppose you did it to keep the dust out of your eyes, but there is none now."

"I had a reason for doing it, but I can put it up now."

She lifted the white veil to its usual place round her hat; as she did so, Chris uttered a sharp exclamation as his eye fell on a bluish-red mark across her face.

"You don't mean to say, mother," he said in a tone of horror, "that one of those scoundrels struck you?"

"They struck a good many of us, Chris, and there was no reason why I should escape more than another."

The lad's face grew white.

"Why did you not call out? I would have—"

"I know you would," she interrupted gently, "and so of course I did not cry out. You had all had enough to try you to the utmost, and I was not going to risk your life by letting you know what had happened. It flashed across me at once that if you had seen it happen you would have been down from the roof in an instant and struck the man. Had you done so, your fate would have been sealed, you would have

had half a dozen bullets in your body; therefore, I simply dropped my veil, and I can assure you that the smart of the Boer's sjambok gave me less pain when I felt that you knew nothing of it."

Chris walked along silently for a minute or two; then he said quietly: "Thank you, mother. I am sure it would have been as you said. I could not have helped it. No one could see his mother struck without interfering."

"I can understand that, dear; but it would have been a poor consolation for me had you been killed in endeavouring to right a wrong that I could very well put up with, and shall forget in a week."

"I suppose so, mother. I should not so much mind if I only knew the fellow's name, or even knew him by sight, so that I might possibly have the chance some day of settling accounts with him."

They walked on until eight o'clock, and then rested under the shade of some rocks. Fortunately there had been some rain two days before, and they had been able to quench their thirst at a little stream that came down from the hills. There were in all some thirty women and eighteen men.

"Look here, Harris," Chris said, "there is a farmhouse over there, and as I see some cattle and horses, it evidently is not deserted. Let us go and see if we can get some bread, and some milk for the women."

"All right!"

The other lads were quite ready to go also, and they walked across to the house, which stood some half a mile away. As they approached it a Boer came out. On seeing them he re-entered it, and appeared again with a rifle.

"I am afraid we shall get nothing here," Harris said. "The Dutchmen in Natal are only waiting for the Boers to advance to join them."

"Well, we will try anyhow," Chris said doggedly. "I dare say that you are right; but Boer or no Boer, if there is any food in that house I mean to get it."

They went quietly on. When they were within fifty yards the Boer shouted to them to go back.

"We have some women and children with us," Chris replied, continuing to advance. "They are exhausted from want of food, and fatigue, and we have come to ask for some bread, and, if you have it in the house, some milk."

"If the house was full of both you should not have a crumb of bread or a drop of milk. Halt! I say, or I will put a bullet into you."

Chris did not heed the command.

"We have plenty of money to pay you, and are willing to give ten times its fair price."

He was now within ten yards of the farmer. The latter burst into a torrent of abuse, and was in the act of raising his rifle when Chris sprung at him. The Boer, who had no idea that this lad would venture to attack him, discharged his rifle almost at random, and the ball passed through the brim of Chris's hat. An instant later his heavy stick fell on the Boer's head and levelled him to the ground.

"Now, Harris," he shouted, "do you and the others go into the house, and first of all bring me out one of these fellows' whips. Cairns, pick up his rifle and reload it. Sankey, do you and the others keep guard at the door, and don't let those viragoes out"—for three women had just

appeared, and were cursing with a fluency that Billingsgate would have envied.

Harris had already come out with a heavy whip by the time Cairns had reloaded. Chris took it and said to the Boer, who, in view of the formidable sticks the lads carried, had thought it best to lie quiet:

"Now you can get up, you hulking ruffian. I am going to give you a lesson in civility. Oh, you won't get up! Well, it will make no difference to me;" and he proceeded to give the howling Boer a tremendous thrashing. "There," he said, when his arm was tired, "you may get up and go, and I hope that the lesson will do you good. Now, Cairns, we will search the house. It is likely enough he has a lot of rifles hidden somewhere, and perhaps when we have gone he may go and fetch some more of his class. We may as well possess ourselves of them."

The seven lads went into the house, paying no further attention to the Boer. In spite of the fury of the women they searched the house thoroughly, and in a large case in a disused room they found twelve Mauser rifles, with a thousand cartridges. They then took a basket and filled it with bread, and emptied the milk from two large pans into a pail."

"We are not thieves and robbers, like your people," Chris said to the women as he threw five shillings on the table. "Your man has been good enough to tell us that he will be in Maritzburg with the Boers in a week's time. Therefore, as war has been declared, the muskets are lawful spoil taken from a rebel. Now, boys, let's be off."

The cartridges were divided among them; then, with the

thirteen guns, the basket, and pail, they started to rejoin their friends.

"Well, that is a fair capture to begin with," Chris said. "As far as we are concerned, the war has begun. The Boer has made off, I see. I should not be surprised if we hear of him and some of his friends again. However, now we are well armed they can come as soon as they like."

Great was the joy among the women and children when they returned with the much-needed refreshment.

"I was getting very anxious about you, Chris," his mother said. "We heard the man fire. But where have you got all these rifles from?"

"The owner of the farm is a Boer, mother, and, as he told us, a rebel. As he began the affair by putting a bullet through my hat, and abusing us and our nation heartily, we took the liberty of searching his house, with good success. I need not say that he did not give us this bread and the pail of milk of his own free-will, but I left the money for them."

His mother had turned pale when he said that a bullet had gone through his hat, but she said nothing.

"What became of the man?" she asked. "You did not kill him, I hope?"

"No, mother; I contented myself with thrashing him with one of his own whips until my arm ached."

There was enough bread for all to have a slice. The women and children had as much milk as they could drink, the rest was divided among the men. The extra rifles were given to those who could best use them. In half an hour the women said that they were ready to go on again, and that they would rather do that than wait, for they greatly feared that

the Boer might gather some of his friends and attack them. Feeling greatly strengthened and refreshed, they started at a good pace. They had gone about a mile when Sankey said to Chris:

"Look, there is a party of mounted men across the valley."

"Then we had better plant ourselves among the rocks, and let the unarmed men go on with the women and children, and take shelter a bit farther on. I don't suppose they will venture to attack us when they find, to their disgust, that we are armed with as good rifles as their own. They have a great respect for their lives."

Accordingly the seven lads and the six men with rifles at once took up a position among the rocks. The rest of the party went forward two hundred yards and then took shelter also. The Boers, feeling certain that the party were unarmed, did not trouble themselves to open fire at a distance, but rode forward in a clump at full gallop.

"They are about a thousand yards away now," one of the men said. "We may as well give them a volley."

The thirteen rifles flashed out almost simultaneously. There were, as they had counted, sixteen Boers. Five horses fell, three others galloped off riderless, and the party broke up and rode off at full speed in various directions.

"I don't think we need trouble any more about them," said Sankey's father, who was one of the party, as he rose to his feet. "You may be sure that several of those who got away carried bullets somewhere about them."

As they turned to rejoin their friends there was a general exclamation of satisfaction, for two large waggons were seen coming along the road. In ten minutes the women and

children, with all the older men, were comfortably seated and on their way to Newcastle. Chris and his party accompanied them on foot so as to form a rear-guard.

"We have won our first battle," Chris laughed.

"But for you there would not have been a battle at all," Field said. "I don't think any of us would have gone forward after that fellow warned us back had you not done so."

"I was determined to get some milk for the children," Chris said, "and would have gone forward even if I had been alone. I don't think I ever felt such a satisfaction as I did in thrashing that Boer. One of them struck my mother across the face, you know, in the train, and though it was not the same man, I feel better now that I have taken it out of someone."

At Newcastle they found a small British force, and learned that there were four or five thousand troops at Dundee. Trains were still running, and after only an hour's delay at Newcastle to obtain a meal, the whole party went on. Late that evening they arrived at Colenso. Mrs. King and the ladies and gentlemen of the party had decided to sleep there, but hearing on the road that the little town was crowded with fugitives from the Transvaal and the farms near the frontier, they determined to continue the journey to the capital, which they reached the next morning. The lads had quite decided upon their course before starting, and had arranged with their parents to remain at Maritzburg. The general opinion was that the British force at the front could not possibly maintain itself, but that as soon as the invasion began in force they must fall back, as the Transvaal Boers would be able to attack them in front and on the right flank, while the Free Staters would pour down through Van Reenen and De Beers

Passes and make straight for Ladysmith, and so threaten their line of retreat.

There were a few indeed who still believed that the Boers would stand entirely upon the defensive so far as Natal went. They would occupy the formidable passes through the Drakensberg and await attack there, while they would invade Cape Colony at many points and raise the Boer population. However, the general opinion was that they would advance into Natal in great force, and in that case it was doubtful, indeed, whether Sir George White could oppose them successfully north of Maritzburg. He might even, it was thought, be obliged to fall back to Durban until reinforcements arrived from England. Already there was a rush to the offices that had been opened for the volunteer corps. Many of the fugitives from the Transvaal had joined, as had most of the young farmers who had been obliged by the hostility of their Dutch neighbours to abandon their homes in the north of Natal, while numbers of all ranks in Maritzburg, Durban, and other towns were giving in their names. All the lads who had come down with Chris had some time before obtained their parents' consent to join a volunteer corps, or form one among themselves, and as it was evident that the crisis was at hand no objections were raised to their doing so at once. Mrs. King would go down to Durban with her friends, so that there was no need for her son to accompany her.

It had been agreed by the other lads that they would all meet at ten o'clock at the hotel where Chris put up, and the party mustered in greater strength than had been expected, for they found that the boys who had preceded them had all waited in the town, and were stopping at the various hotels.

They too had been as badly treated by the Boers as the last arrivals, and were all eager to begin work.

"There is no getting a private room here," Chris said, "so we had better go outside the town and talk things over."

As they went they chatted over their adventures on the road, and great satisfaction was felt among those who had not been present, on hearing how Chris had thrashed the Boer, and had gone up to him in spite of his threat to shoot. At their last meeting at Johannesburg they had elected him their captain, but he had at the time refused to accept the post, saying that it would be wiser to decide that afterwards, as one of the others might show himself better fitted for the position. However, their first step when they sat down by the bank of the little river outside the town was to again elect him by acclamation.

"Very well," he said, "as you all wish it I will accept the post. I suppose we are well provided with funds. Our fathers all said they would find our outfit, and money enough for all expenses." There was a general assent. "Well, we start better than we had expected, for we have thirteen rifles: twelve of them are Mausers, the other we will sell; so we shall have to buy nine others. That had better be done this morning, for we may be sure that there will be a rush to the gunsmiths' shops. In the next place, we must each buy a saddle and saddlery. We have agreed that we will not have any approach to uniform, because, as we all speak Dutch, we shall be able to pass unobserved, if necessary, among them. But I have been thinking it over, and it seems to me that if we have nothing of the sort we shall run the risk of being shot by our own men."

"What are we to do, then, Chris?"

"I think that we had better get flat caps, like the fatigue caps our soldiers wear. They can be carried in our pockets inside our shirts when we are in the neighbourhood of the Boers, and when we are riding anywhere near our own troops we can put them on instead of our felt hats. It would alter our appearance altogether when riding in groups, and even at a distance we could hardly be taken for Boers."

All agreed that it would be an excellent plan.

"We shall, of course, have bandoliers for our cartridges, and haversacks for our provisions, and spare packets of ammunition. Not an hour must be lost in getting these things. I hear that Captain Brookfield, who came up to Johannesburg last year and stayed for a fortnight with us, has raised a corps, which he has named the Maritzburg Scouts. I will call upon him this afternoon and tell him that there are one-and-twenty of us, all somewhere about my age, and that we mean fighting; and that as we all speak Dutch we think we can do more good by scouting about on our own account than by joining any regular corps; but that at the same time we should like, if there was anything like regular fighting, to place ourselves under the orders of an officer like himself. It is rather difficult to explain, you know, but I think he will understand what we mean. We should be, in fact, a section of his troop, acting generally on independent service, either scouting, or going in among the Boers and getting intelligence, trying to blow up bridges, and engaging looting parties—for we may be sure that the Boers will be scattering all over the country plundering.

"Of course I shall say, if he won't accept us on those terms,

we shall do as we best can on our own account; but that as we don't require pay, and will provide ourselves with all necessaries, we do not see that we should be any burden when we join him. I propose that we meet here again this afternoon, and I hope that by that time we shall all have got our mounts and saddlery. I hear that many of the loyal farmers north have driven their animals down here, and are only too glad to sell the horses at the usual prices. Mind, the clothes we have now won't do; we must get them of farmer fashion. Don't go together to any shop, but let each choose for himself; we don't want anything like uniformity of pattern. The stuff must be strong. We shall each want a couple of blankets; one of these, with a slit cut in the middle to slip over the head, will serve as a greatcoat. Now, let us be off! To save trouble, I should say that we had each better put a certain sum, say twenty pounds, to go into a fund for general expenditure—food and ammunition, and that sort of thing—into one of the banks, and we can draw upon that as we require it."

"I should say, Chris," Sankey said, "that we had better put all our money into the fund. Our people are all going to pay for our outfit, and you know they have agreed to give us a hundred pounds each to last us through the war. It is of no use carrying money about with us. I think we should agree to pay it all into the common fund, and that at the end of the business what remains is to be divided among those of us who go through it."

"I think that is a very good plan, Sankey. Certainly we cannot all expect to come out alive, and that arrangement will save all trouble about money."

On going back into the town they learned that a large farmer had encamped two miles away with a big drove of cattle and a couple of hundred horses, many of which were fine animals, and it was agreed at once that Sankey, Carmichael, and Peters should hire a buggy and drive over there and choose twenty-one good horses. Harris and Field undertook the purchase of the rifles, and Chris went to the office which Captain Brookfield, who had been an officer in the English army, had taken. He sent in his name, and was at once shown in.

"Well, Chris," he said cordially as he entered, "I am glad to see you. You have grown and widened out a good deal since last year. I suppose your father and mother have both come down with you?"

"My mother has come down, sir, but my father thought that he ought to remain behind to look after the mines."

"Have you come here to enlist?"

"Not exactly, sir, and yet I have to a certain extent;" and he told the officer of the little corps that had been formed among his companions at Johannesburg.

"A very good idea. Speaking Dutch, as you say they all do, they ought to do good service as scouts. But why have you come to me?"

This Chris explained.

The captain laughed. "I suppose the fact is, Chris, you think that you will be able to see and do more if you are altogether independent of other people's orders."

"Perhaps that is it, sir; but if there is any cavalry fighting we should much rather be under orders. Such a small corps would look ridiculous marching out by itself."

RHODESIA
Tuli
Palachwe
Limpopo R.
Limpopo R.
PORTUGUESE EAST AFRICA
Pietersburg
Leydsdorp
Olifants R.
TRANSVAAL
Lydenburg
Komati Poort
Olifants R.
Pretoria
Barberton
Lorenço Marques
MAFEKING
Johannesburg
Middleburg
Potchefstroom
Vereeniging
Vryburg
Klerksdorp
Vaal R.
Standerton
Heilbron
Kroonstadt
Utrecht
Vryheid
Lindley
ORANGE RIVER
Bethlehem
Winburg
Dundee
Elandslaagte
KIMBERLEY
Brandfort
LADYSMITH
Modder R.
Paardeberg
Bloemfontein
Modder River
Riet R.
Ladybrand
Ficksburg
Weenen
Greytown
Tugela R.
Belmont
COLONY
Masera
BASUTO LAND
Pietermaritzburg
Durban
Wepener
Orange R.
Caledon R.
Orange R.
Bethulie
De Aar
Colesberg
Herschel
Burghers Dorp
Aliwal North
Barkley East
Naauw Poort
Stormberg
Molteno
Middleburg
Sterkstroom
CAPE COLONY
Graaff Reine
Gt. Fish R.
East London
Grahams Town
Port Elizabeth
SOUTH EASTERN AFRICA.
Scale of Miles
0 50 100 150 200

M 683

"Well, I don't see any reason why you should not carry out your plan. It would certainly be better that you should have some—what I may call—official sanction. All the men in our corps are paid five shillings a day, and as your troop would serve under different conditions, you can to a certain extent dictate your own terms. I will, if you like, accept you as an independent corps, attached to my command when with me, but at other times free to scout and to act as you choose; but mind, I cannot be responsible for any scrape that you get into. You might call yourselves the Johannesburg section of the Maritzburg Scouts, maintaining yourselves at your own expense, and drawing neither pay nor rations."

"Thank you very much, sir; that is just what we want."

"Then, if you will bring your companions here this evening I will swear you in. I shall administer a different oath to you from that which the others take, and merely pledge you, when under my orders, to obey them, with permission to withdraw from the corps when you choose. And indeed, receiving no pay or assistance from government, you would naturally be free to do so."

Leaving Captain Brookfield, Chris went and bought his clothes, bandolier and belt, and saddlery, and then returned to the hotel and told his mother how he had got on, and that a horse and rifle would, he hoped, be obtained that afternoon.

"It seems to me a terribly dangerous business, Chris; but as your father agreed to it, of course I need say no more. I have a cheque for five hundred pounds for my expenses and yours."

"Father gave me a hundred before I started, mother; that will more than pay for my outfit. I don't know what we

shall do for the horses, but there will certainly not be much over."

"Yes, I know, Chris; and he told me to hand you over another hundred when I went to the bank, which I shall do this afternoon."

CHAPTER III

AT THE FRONT

AT five o'clock the lads from Johannesburg again met, and reported the result of the afternoon's work. The nine Mauser rifles had been bought, and six thousand rounds of ammunition had been purchased. This appeared an excessive amount, but as there might be a difficulty in obtaining this ammunition, they bought up all that could be found in the town. Peters and his party had chosen the horses for the troop. The farmer was a well-known breeder of good stock, and was glad to dispose of some of them at a fair price in order to lessen their number. He had already had several enquiries from corps that were being raised, but the prices were higher than could be paid for ordinary troopers, though several had been bought by officers. The lot the lads had picked out had been put aside, and they had given the farmer fifty pounds earnest-money to hold them till the next morning.

"They are as good a looking lot of horses as I ever saw," Peters said, "in fact, by a long way the best. I always heard that he was one of the largest breeders of good horses in South Africa. He had eight or ten extraordinarily good ones, but, of

course, he wanted extra prices for these; but from the rest—and he has some three hundred of them—he let us choose any we liked at one price, and I think I can say that we shall be as well mounted a corps as any out here. Of course we avoided the showy-looking horses, and chose those specially suited to the country and likely to be fast. Mr. Duncan had several thoroughbreds from home, and there is no doubt that his stock has benefited by it; they are all of the country type, sturdy and compact, and yet somewhat finer in the limb than any I ever saw in the Transvaal. We were delighted with them."

All the lads were accustomed from childhood to horses, but those Chris had selected as the committee of inspection were admitted by their friends to be the best judges of horseflesh in the party, their fathers being wealthy men who always bought the finest horses money could obtain.

"We will go over in a body to-morrow," Chris said, "and pay for them and bring them back. We are lucky indeed to have got hold of such a good lot. Are they pretty even animals, Peters?"

"Yes, I really don't think there is anything to choose between them."

"Well then, the fair way will be, to make one-and-twenty tickets with as many numbers and fasten one to the mane of each horse, then we will put another twenty-one numbers into a hat and draw them; in that way everyone will be satisfied. Those of you who have not got their money from their people had better ask them for it this evening, so that we can settle up to-morrow for the horses and rifles and ammunition. The hundred pounds we have each been promised will well cover

all our expenses up to the moment we start, and I should think leave us with something like twenty pounds apiece in pocket, but all we have and the other hundred for future expenses we had better put into the bank here to-morrow. We must arrange for four of us to sign cheques, each cheque to be signed by two, but we had better give them all our signatures, so that in case what we can call the finance committee of four are all killed or taken prisoners there will be no bother about having fresh signatures to arrange about."

"Well," Sankey said, "we might as well settle that at once. I propose that Field, Carmichael, Capper, and, of course, you, form the committee."

As no amendment was offered, this was at once agreed to.

"What time did you say that we would come over to fetch the horses?"

"About ten o'clock."

"Well, will you all be at my hotel to-morrow at half-past eight with your money? Then we will all sign our names on paper, the committee first; afterwards they shall go with me to the bank and pay all the money in, give them the list of signatures, and tell them that until further notice two of the four first names will sign the cheques, but that should circumstances prevent any two of them being able to do so, others will sign instead. The account had better stand as the Johannesburg Scouts. When we have arranged that, we will hire a couple of light waggons and start. Have you all got your saddlery?"

"Yes."

"Well, we will take it with us, and then we can ride the horses back. I will get the tickets made out."

As soon as the bank opened in the morning, Chris and his

three companions presented themselves, and had an interview with the manager, who was somewhat surprised when twenty-one cheques and cash to the amount of three thousand five hundred pounds were handed in, each member having deducted the amount paid for saddlery and clothes. "We wish the account to stand in the name of the Johannesburg Scouts, and cheques will be signed by two of the four names standing first on this list; but as casualties may occur, you will please accept any of these signatures. Our little corps will form part of the Maritzburg Scouts, but in money matters we keep to ourselves, being all volunteers serving without pay."

The manager ran his eye over the cheques. All the names were well known to him as those of prominent men at Johannesburg, and the great majority had already accounts at his bank, as all had some time previously made arrangements for drawing money in case of a necessity.

"I suppose, Mr. King," he said, "that as you and your friends represent the corps, you are all young men?"

"We are all boys," Chris answered with a smile, "but we are old enough to do men's work, and in the Transvaal the Boers are commandeering all boys two or three years younger than we are."

"Well, I congratulate you all both on your patriotism and your pluck, Mr. King, and I have no doubt that you will do good service."

Receiving a cheque-book, they drew two hundred pounds for current expenses, and then, going back to the hotel, found the two Cape-carts and their companions ready, and the saddlery already stowed away. On arriving at the farm all were highly pleased with the horses their comrades had selected. They

had on the way agreed that it would be a good plan to buy four others, to act as pack-horses and to furnish them with remounts in case any of their own were shot. These were to be sent into the town by two Kaffirs, whom they arranged to take into their service, for the farmer said at once, when they asked him, that he could very well spare them, as he would be parting with a considerable number of his horses and cattle, and would not require so many hands as he had at present. The two men he chose for them were both active young natives; they made no objection to the exchange of masters, and, indeed, seemed pleased at the thought of going with them to fight the Boers, who were universally hated by the natives.

A cheque was given to the farmer for their purchase, then the horses were chosen by lot as agreed, and were at once saddled and mounted. They had all been partially broken in, and as the boys were good riders, they were, after a little preliminary struggle, soon at their ease, and, taking a couple of hours' sharp ride through the country, returned on good terms with their mounts. Two or three hours were spent in teaching the horses to stand steady as soon as the reins were thrown over their heads, this being a training to which all horses in the Cape are subjected. Then they rode back to the town and arranged with a farmer near it to picket their horses in one of his meadows, and for their feed while they remained there. The rest of the day was spent in laying in their supplies. The rifles and ammunition were paid for, pack-saddles bought for the four spare horses, a brace of revolvers purchased for each member, haversacks ordered for the whole party, and bags to carry a supply of grain for each horse. In

the evening they went out to the farm, and after discharging their rifles a few times fed their horses.

This they repeated in the morning, so as to familiarize them with the sound of firearms; then they saddled and mounted them, and after riding for half an hour drew up in line, as Captain Brookfield, who had sworn them in on the previous afternoon, was to inspect them at eight o'clock. They had all put on their working clothes, bandoliers and belts, and high boots, and the captain on his arrival, after closely inspecting them, expressed his strongest approval of their appearance.

"I really congratulate you, Mr. King," he said, "on having command of twenty such serviceable-looking young fellows. As they can all ride, and, as you tell me, can all shoot, they ought to do really good service, and I should be well pleased if all my troop were composed of such good material. From the fact that you can all speak Dutch, and most of you Kaffir, you will have great opportunities of obtaining information, and can, in case of need, pass as young Boers. In fact, I may say that there will be some danger of your being mistaken for them by our men. I should take you for them myself, except that you all look brighter and more wide-awake than Boers generally do; but an artilleryman could hardly be blamed if he plumped a shell among you at a distance of two or three thousand yards."

"We thought of that, sir;" Chris turned to his band, "Change caps!" All pulled field-service caps from their pockets, took off the soft felts, rolled them up and forced them into their valises, and put on the caps.

"That is excellent!" Captain Brookfield exclaimed. "That certainly alters your appearance altogether, and as far as your figures could be made out through a glass, it could be seen

that you are an irregular body of some sort. And this can be still more plainly seen if, as I should advise you, you always ride in fours when you are approaching our lines; there will then be little chance of a mistake being made. Where did you pick up all those horses?"

"We bought them yesterday from a farmer named Duncan, who has brought them down from his place near Dundee."

"Ah! that accounts for it; he is one of the best-known horse-breeders in the colony. I had not heard that he had come down."

"He only arrived two days ago, sir. We were fortunate to hear of it, and some of us rode over early yesterday and were lucky enough to secure them."

"You were lucky. There are several mounted corps being formed here and at Durban, and horses will go up in price rapidly. Where is he staying?"

"About a mile and a half farther out, sir. If you want horses I should think that you had better go on at once, for he told me that he had sold sixty yesterday, but that very few of them were anything like as good horses as these."

"No. People are subscribing handsomely, but we cannot afford to mount our troopers on such horses as these. A good many gentlemen have found their own horses, and of course will be well mounted; but a good, sound, country horse is all we can afford for the others; they are excellent for ordinary work, though, of course, not so fast as yours, nor quite so big. Your horses have all a strain of English thoroughbred blood, and if you should at any time have to ride for it there would be little chance of the Boers overtaking you, though some of them are very well mounted, for the two

things a Boer will spend money on, are his horse and his rifle. And when do you start?"

"We are going to-morrow morning. I went to the station-master yesterday evening and arranged for trucks for the horses, to be attached to an early train to Dundee. We want to get up in time to see the first of it, and we should lose three days if we were to travel by road."

"That is the right spirit, and I wish I could go with you; but my troop will wear a sort of uniform, Norfolk jackets and riding-breeches, and the outfitters are so overwhelmed with orders that it will be another couple of days at least before they are ready. Then the men must have two or three days' drill before they start; I am still short of horses, so I will ride on and see Duncan. I want thirty-five more, and as yet, although subscriptions are coming in well, we are still a good deal short of our requirements. However, I dare say I shall be able to make some arrangement with Duncan, as I shall probably have enough to pay him in full by the end of the week. Altogether, I don't suppose I shall be ready to start for another ten days, and unless the Boers delay their advance I am afraid that I shall not get to Dundee."

"Do you not believe that we shall be able to hold the town?"

"I hardly think that there is a chance of it, and I am sure we made a mistake in sending a portion of the force there. I know the premier was most anxious that our troops should be posted as far north as possible, in order to save the loyal farmers from plunder. If the position were stronger and impossible to be turned, the case would be different; but it is not strong, and can be turned on each flank.

If the Boers march to attack General Symons, who is in command there, he may possibly beat them off; but as they can advance towards Ladysmith either from the Free State on one side or the Transvaal on the other, he and his troops would be cut off, and the loyal farmers would be plundered just as much as if Symons had remained at Ladysmith. I fancy all the military men think that a grave mistake has been made, and that General White should not have exposed half his force to disaster. Besides, the position of Ladysmith is no more defensible than that of Dundee. The Tugela would be the natural line of defence, but even that could be turned by troops from the Transvaal going through Zululand, and the line of the river would be very difficult to defend by a force of less than twenty thousand men. However, we shall see how the thing works out—how enterprising the Boers are, and how warmly the Free Staters throw themselves into the work."

"You think that we shall have a hard time, Captain Brookfield?"

"Yes, I think that is certain, even if Cape Colony keeps quiet, which I am very much afraid it will not do. If it rises, it will take all the strength of England to put it down. Well, I wish you all luck. I can assure you I feel proud of my Johannesburg section, and I shall be glad when you join me."

He shook hands with the whole of the lads and then rode off.

"The train starts at eight o'clock," Chris said. "We had better get our good-byes over to-night, get some breakfast, if we are able to do so, at half-past five, and meet here at six. We ought to be at the station at least an hour before the

train starts. We shall not only have to get the horses into the trucks, which is certain to be a troublesome business, as they are altogether new to it, but we shall have to see to our other stores and belongings. I have arranged that we shall travel with the horses, so that we can each stand at the heads of our own animals, and if they are very wild, we can blindfold them until they become accustomed to the situation. I have bought a couple of trusses of hay from Thomas, and he will send down two of his native boys to the station. I should advise you all to put some food into your haversacks, there is no saying how long we may be on the road."

"What sort of trucks are they, Chris?"

"They have high sides, but no roofs. Of course I would rather have had roofs, but the station-master could not provide any waggons with them. But he showed me these, and as the sides are quite high enough to prevent the horses getting out, they will do very well."

The saddles were taken off and piled together. There was no chance of rain, so they were left uncovered. The lads then walked back into the town. There was, of course, a sad parting that evening between Chris and his mother, but she bore up well. She knew that hundreds of other women were parting with husbands or sons, and she felt that, as the main cause of the war was to rescue the Uitlanders in the Transvaal from the oppression of the Boers, it behoved all the fugitives from that country to do their utmost.

In the morning the lads all arrived punctually at the rendezvous. The horses were fed to the accompaniment, as usual, of pistol shots. Then they were saddled up, the valises the lads had brought down with them were strapped on,

and with their rifles slung behind them they rode to the station.

It was, as they had expected, a long and troublesome business to get the horses into the trucks, but at last this was managed. Nose-bags were put on, with a few double-handfuls of grain, then one trooper was left to each two horses, while the rest saw to their bundles of blankets, their stores of tea, sugar, and flour, preserved milk, cocoa, bacon, and tinned food. A couple of frying-pans, and a canteen of tin cups and plates, a knife, fork, and spoon each, and two kettles, completed their outfit. They had put their soft felt hats in their valises, and were all in their flat fatigue-caps.

The train was a long one, but the carriages with it were empty, for while the trains from the north were closely packed, there were few persons indeed proceeding up country. The trucks, however, were well filled, as great quantities of stores were being taken up, some to Ladysmith, and others for the force at Dundee. The horses soon became accustomed to the motion, and their masters took the opportunity of familiarizing themselves with them, by talking to them, patting them, and giving them pieces of bread and an occasional lump of sugar. The two Kaffirs had brought on the pack-horses four water-skins and a couple of buckets, and in the heat of the day the horses were allowed a good drink, while their masters, whose haversacks had been filled by their friends, enjoyed a hearty meal, washed down by tin mugs full of champagne.

They were in the highest spirits, although the meal was taken under difficult circumstances, for all were seated on the upper rails of the trucks, there being no room for them to

sit down among the horses. The plates were all packed up, and fingers and teeth served for knives and forks, which was the less important since chickens were the staple of the meal; and these had been cut up before starting. Many were the jokes that passed along the line. All felt that it was the last experience they were likely to have of civilized food, and that it would be a long while before champagne or any other wine would fall to their lot. The Kaffirs, who had each charge of two spare horses, enjoyed themselves no less, for they had a fair share of the provisions of their masters, and were in a high state of contentment with their prospects.

There was a halt of an hour at Ladysmith. Many of the officers and soldiers gathered at the station, their work for the day finished, and the arrival of the train being always an event of some importance in the little town. They were amused and interested at the party of young fellows who alighted to stretch their legs and get a change of position.

"Which is your leader?" a major asked Field.

"The one talking to an officer. His name is Chris King."

"Is he chosen because he is the oldest of you?"

"No, that has nothing to do with it. We are all within a year of the same age. We have all been chums and friends, and have hunted and shot together, and he is the one we elected as our leader, just as you would choose the captain of a cricket club. We all come from Johannesburg, find our own horses, arms, and outfits, and ask nothing whatever from the government; and as we speak Dutch, and all know more or less Kaffir, we fancy we can make a good deal better scouts than your cavalry, who can't ask a question of a Boer or get information from a native."

The major laughed. He saw that the lad a little resented the joking tone in which he had asked the question.

"I have no doubt that you are right," he said, "and I am quite sure that I should like half a dozen of you as subalterns. When did you come down from Johannesburg?"

"We left there about a week ago, and as we were only at Maritzburg three days, we have not lost any time."

"Indeed, I think that is a record performance. Of course you are all looking forward to your first skirmish; I can assure you we are."

"We had our first on the way down, when we were between Newcastle and the frontier. Four or five of us went to a farmhouse to try and get some food and milk for the women and children. It was a Boer's place, and the fellow came out with a rifle and warned us off. We went forward, and he took a shot at King when he was quite close to him, but fortunately the bullet only went through his hat. Chris knocked him down and gave him a tremendous thrashing with his own whip. Then we took some provisions and paid for them, and, searching the house, found twelve Mauser rifles and a lot of ammunition. We took these off without paying for them. The Boer had made off while we were searching the house, and he and some twenty others pursued us, not dreaming that we were now armed. However, we gave them a volley, and emptied three saddles and killed three or four horses, and they moved off without trying to make our further acquaintance."

"Well done, lads!" the officer said warmly; "that was an excellent beginning, and I have no doubt that you will follow it up well."

Similar conversations were going on all along the platform, and when at last the lads again took their places in the trucks, a hearty cheer was given them. The sun was setting when they arrived at Dundee. It was a larger place than Ladysmith, as there were some coal-mines in the neighbourhood, and a considerable number of men were employed in them. Like Ladysmith it is situated on a plain dominated by hills. The camp was some little distance out of the town. An officer was at the station with a party of men to receive the stores brought up by the train. Chris at once went up to him and saluted.

"We have just arrived, sir; we are a section of the Maritzburg Scouts, acting independently. As we are all from Johannesburg, and find our own horses, equipment, and food, provide our own rations, and, of course, serve without pay, we propose to scout on our own account, and as we all speak Dutch well, I think that we may be useful in obtaining information. We shall, of course, search the country in whatever direction may be considered most useful."

"I have no doubt that you will be of good service, sir," the officer said.

"I suppose we can camp anywhere we like?"

"I should think so. As you do not draw rations, it can matter little where you post yourselves; but I don't think that you will be able to get tents to-night."

"We shall not want them, sir; we have each a large waterproof sheet, and intend to use them as *tentes d'abri*. I suppose I had better report myself at the head-quarters of the general?"

"Yes, that would be the proper thing. The camp is a mile

and a half away; if you follow the Glencoe railway, you cannot miss it."

As soon as the horses were detrained and the baggage packed, the little party mounted and left the station, and choosing a piece of unoccupied ground a few hundred yards away, proceeded to unsaddle and picket the horses, while Chris rode away to the camp accompanied by one of the natives to hold his horse there. He had no difficulty in finding it, and, dismounting, walked to the group of head-quarter tents. His appearance excited a good deal of amusement and some chaff from the soldiers he passed. He looked, indeed, like a young Dutch farmer in his rough clothes, and his rifle, and a bandolier of cartridges. Seeing a young officer close to a tent, he asked him which was that of the adjutant-general.

"He is there talking to the general at the door of his tent. Do you wish to speak to him?"

"I should be glad to do so," Chris replied.

The officer walked across and informed the colonel that Chris wanted to speak to him.

"Bring him across, Mr. Williams," the general himself said. "He is evidently a young farmer, and possibly brings in some news of the enemy's movements."

The lieutenant returned to Chris and led him up to the general.

"You have some news that you wish to give us, sir?" Sir Penn Symons said.

"No, general; but I hope to be able to do so to-morrow."

He then stated his position and the nature of his command.

"We are all very well mounted, sir," he went on, "and as we all speak Dutch, hope to be useful. At any rate, we shall

M683

CHRIS OFFERS HIS SERVICES TO SIR PENN SYMONS

be no trouble to you, as we draw neither rations nor pay. We think we can pass anywhere as Boers; that is why we have not adopted any uniform."

"I have no doubt you will be of service," the general said, "though I hardly think that you will pass as Boers with those caps."

"We have all wide-brimmed hats to use while we are scouting, general; but we carry these too, so that on our return towards your lines we can be recognized even at a distance as not being Boers, and so avoid being fired at."

"Yes, that is a very necessary precaution. I will have officers commanding cavalry and artillery detachments warned, that a section of Maritzburg volunteers are dressed as farmers, but may be known in the distance by having caps similar to the ordinary infantry field-service caps.

"Well, sir, I shall be glad if you will to-morrow ride to the south, following the river, and endeavour to find out whether the Boers have any considerable force in that direction, either on this side of the river or the other. I may tell you that five of the Natal police were captured on the evening of the 13th at De Jagers Drift. The Boers have been in possession of Newcastle for the past three days, and they are certainly crossing the passes from the Free State. You must be very careful, for they have scouting parties across the river almost as far as the Tugela. However, we hardly expect any serious struggle for another week or ten days; for all the accounts are to the effect that the Boers are still very deficient in transport, and that for the past week those at Laing's Nek and the other passes have been very much straitened for provisions. It would be as well for you, while you are at Dundee, to come

over once a day to report your doings, and to receive orders as to the point where we most need information. Have you gone into lodgings in the town?"

"No, sir. We have waterproof sheets that form *tentes d'abri*, and we prefer being with our horses, which were only bought a few days ago; so, as we shall not have much opportunity of sleeping otherwise than in the open for some time, we thought it as well to begin at once, especially as the weather looks threatening, and the horses, being unaccustomed to be picketed, might pull up the pegs and get loose were there a heavy rain."

"You seem to be well fitted for the work, and to set about it in the right spirit."

"We have all been accustomed to hunting expeditions, sir, when we have often been out for some days, so that we understand how to shift for ourselves, though we are new to campaigning."

"What rifles have you? that does not look like a Lee-Metford."

"No, general, it is a Mauser. We captured twelve of them at a Boer's farmhouse three or four miles this side of Newcastle six days ago. He fired at us, and though his bullet only went through my hat, we thought ourselves justified in searching his house."

"Certainly you were. We heard that there had been a skirmish on the road, and learned the particulars from one of those who took part in it, and who stayed here for two or three days before going down the country. He said that four or five young gentlemen, who were coming down with a party of women and children from Volksrust, had gone

to a farmhouse to try and get food, milk, and bread for the females. The Boer farmer insulted them, and shot at one of them when but two or three yards away; he had been tremendously thrashed by the young fellow, and they returned laden with a good supply of milk and bread, and twelve rifles and a lot of ammunition that they had found at the farm. And with these they and some of the men had beaten off an attack of a score of Boers without any loss to themselves."

"Yes, general, that was our party; we had sent forward for some waggons, and got into Dundee two hours after the skirmish; and as there was a train just going we went on at once, and reached Maritzburg the next morning, where we were joined by some of our party who had come down the day before. As we had made all our plans before leaving Johannesburg, we were able to start this morning, which was the third after our arrival there."

"You were prompt indeed," the general said with a smile, "and must have needed money as well as brains."

"We had all obtained leave of our families, general, and were well provided with funds to carry us through the campaign if it lasts for a year. We wanted to be in time for the first fight."

"I think yours was the first fight, except that a few shots were exchanged between our scouts and the Boers on the morning after the ultimatum expired. Now, sir, if you should at any time be in want of necessaries I shall be glad to supply you; but I cannot furnish you with ammunition, as the Mausers carry a smaller bullet than our rifles."

"Thank you, general, but we have enough to last us for a considerable time, having brought up six thousand rounds."

"A good provision indeed," the general laughed; "enough to last you through half a dozen pitched battles. I shall be in the town at six o'clock to-morrow morning, and shall be pleased to inspect your little corps before you start."

"I thank you, general; we shall all be very proud to be inspected by you."

Then, saluting, he returned to his horse and rode back to Dundee. He was pleased to see that the eleven little tents had been erected strictly in line, that the horses were all standing quietly at the picket-rope, and that two of the troop were placed as sentries. A large fire was blazing in front of the tents, the two natives were squatting by it, the kettles were swung over it, and a joint of meat was roasting there. Two or three of the lads were standing talking together; the rest had gone into the town. Cairns came up to him as he dismounted.

"Have you heard the news, Chris?"

"No, I have not heard any particular news."

"I was at the station a quarter of an hour ago, and a telegram had just been received, that the Boers were, when it was sent off, entering Elandslaagte station, and were in the act of capturing the passenger train that was standing there. The message stopped abruptly, as no doubt the Boers entered the room where the clerk was at work at the needles."

"By Jove we are in luck!" Chris said. "Of course that was the train that had to leave three hours after us. If we had stopped for that, the horses, rifles, and kit would all have gone, and we should now be prisoners. It is serious news, though, for it is evident that not only are they marching against us in front and on both flanks, but have cut our

communications with Ladysmith. There can be no doubt that, as everyone said there, it was a mistake to send General Symons forward here, as it was almost certain that with four regiments, three batteries of artillery, a regiment of cavalry, and a few hundred of the Natal police and volunteers, he could never maintain himself here. Why, we heard at Ladysmith that a column had gone out the day before towards Besters station, as the news had come in that they were even then in that neighbourhood. It was a false alarm, but it was enough to show that the Boers were likely to be coming down and cutting the railway in our rear. General Symons told me that he did not expect any general advance of the enemy just yet, because he heard that their transport was incomplete, and that they were very short of provisions. But I don't think that want of transport would prevent their advancing. We know well enough that the Boers think nothing of going out for three or four days without any prospect of getting any more provisions than they carry about them, unless they have the luck to bring down an antelope. And as Utrecht and Vryheid and Newcastle are all within a few miles of us, and the Free Staters have already come down through some of the passes of the Drakensberg, they must be within an easy ride of us; and if they are in force enough to drive us out of this place, they must know they would find themselves in clover, for we heard at Ladysmith that there were provisions and stores for two months collected here."

CHAPTER IV

DUNDEE

AFTER picketing his horse, Chris went into the town. He found the streets full of excited people, for the news that the railway had been cut was serious indeed, and the scene reminded Chris of that which he had witnessed in the streets of Johannesburg but eight days before. Only eight days! and yet it seemed to him as if weeks had passed since then, so much had been done, so great had been the changes. As at Johannesburg, a considerable portion of the population had left, seeing that, although the troops might for a time defend the town, the Boers were certain to cut the line of railway. Work at the coal-mines had been pushed on feverishly of late, for, strangely enough, there was no store of coals either in Dundee itself or at any of the stations down to Durban, and the authorities had only woke up a few days before to the fact that coal would be required in large quantities for the transports on the arrival of the troops. But now all this was to come to a stop. The hands would be thrown out of employment, and the town would become stagnant until it was captured by the Boers, or until an army arrived of sufficient strength to clear Natal of its invaders. That evening many who possessed vehicles started by road for Ladysmith, feeling that in another twenty-four hours it might be too late.

At seven o'clock, as had been arranged when they arrived, all the members of the band met at their bivouac for supper. There was a general feeling of excitement among them. They

had known that hostilities must soon begin, but to find that the line had already been cut, and that the enemy were closing in in all directions, came almost as a surprise. This, however, in no way prevented them from enjoying their meal. After it was over they held, at Chris's suggestion, a sort of council. He had already told them what the general had said to him, and that they were to be inspected in the morning. As their saddlery was all new, there was nothing to be done in the way of burnishing buckles and rubbing up leather. As Chris remarked, all that would be necessary was an hour's work in the morning grooming their horses.

"Now," he said, "that the work is going to begin, we must draw up a few rules, for, volunteers though we are, we must have some regulations. In the first place, I find that the troops all parade in order of battle before daybreak, so as to be able to repel a sudden attack or move in any direction that may be required. If it is necessary for them, it is still more necessary for us, and I think that it should be a standing rule that we are all ready to mount at daybreak. Sentries must be posted at night, however safe we may feel. I think there should be two, relieved every two hours. There will be no hardship in that, as each would only go on duty every other night. In the next place, I think there should be what they call an officer of the day, who would generally be in charge of the arrangements, see that the Kaffirs attended to their horses properly, and so on. You see, we shall not be always acting together, but might sometimes be broken into four troops, in which case one in each five should command. I think that the same lot should always keep together. What do you think? Would it be better that in each group of five

one should be in charge each day, or that each group should choose one to act as non-commissioned officer?"

There was no reply.

"What do you think yourself, Chris?" Sankey asked after a pause.

"You are all as well able to judge as I am," he replied. "I think that it would perhaps be the best way to write down the twenty names and put them in a hat, and draw them one by one. The first five should be number one squad. I don't know whether that is the right word, but anyhow it will do for them. The next five, number two, and so on. Then each five can vote whether they would prefer alternate commands, or to choose one of their number as permanent non-commissioned officer. If they prefer this, they must then ballot as to which among them shall be leader. If you can think of any way that you would like better, by all means say so."

All agreed that the plan that he proposed should be adopted. Four groups were first chosen. Before they proceeded to the next step, Peters said:

"Of course I am quite game to carry it out as you suggest, Chris, but don't you think it would be a good plan to let the final decision stand for a week or two, each taking the leadership of his group in rotation? At the end of that time we should be better able to make a choice than we can be now."

"I think that is a very good idea, Peters. What do you all say? Will you each take your turn alphabetically for the present, and at the end of fifteen days, when each of you has led three times, you can then decide whether each squad shall choose a permanent leader or go on as you have begun."

All at once agreed to the proposal. They felt, good friends as they were, that it would be very difficult to decide now.

"Very well, then, it shall be so," Chris said. "To-morrow we shall certainly do some scouting, but in a day or two you may be shut up here, and until we get away there will be no scouting to be done. We must have some signals. Suppose we are scattered over two or three miles, we may want to assemble, and must be able to signal. "I thought of it before we started from home, and put down in my pocket-book the sort of thing that I fancied would be wanted. I will read it out to you."

He stirred the fire into a blaze and then read:

"One shot followed by another and a third, with ten seconds between them, will mean 'Enemy seen on the right'; with twenty seconds between, 'Enemy seen on the left'; then, after a pause, two shots in quick succession will mean 'Enemy in strength'; three shots will be 'Small party only'; one shot, followed at an interval of ten seconds by two in succession, will mean 'Retire to the point agreed on before we separated'; followed by three shots in quick succession, will be 'Close in to the centre'. We can think of others afterwards, but I think that will do to begin with. I know that you have all pocket-books, so take down these signals at once."

"We ought to know where you will be," Field said, "so that we could rally round you ready for the next order."

"That might be so; therefore we had better fix on three shots in quick succession, followed in ten seconds by a fourth. The sound will be sufficient to let you know pretty well where I am, and you will, on hearing it, join me at once. Are there any other suggestions?"

There was silence, and then the books were closed.

"I cannot too strongly impress upon you all," Chris said, after they had chatted for some time, "the necessity for being extremely cautious. We know how slim the Boers are, and how accustomed they are to stalk game; and we shall have to be as watchful as deer, more so, in fact, since we have not their power of smell. When we break up into four parties, each party must scatter, keeping three or four hundred yards apart. On arriving at any swell or the crest of a hill, a halt must be made, and every foot of the country searched by your field-glasses, no matter how long it takes. You must assure yourself that there are no moving objects in sight. When you get near such a point you must dismount, and, leaving your horse, crawl forward until you reach a point from where you have a good view, and on no account stand up. While you are making your observations any Boers who might be lying in sight would be certain to notice a figure against the sky-line, and we know that many of them are provided with glasses as good as our own. We must be as careful as if we were out after game instead of men. You all know these things as well as I do, but I want to impress them upon you. You see, they have captured five of the Natal police, who are a very sharp set of fellows. However, a few days' scouting will show us far better what is required than any amount of thinking beforehand. There is one thing that I want to say to you. You elected me for your leader, but it is quite probable that when we have worked together for a bit some of you may prove much better qualified for the post than I am. What I want to say now is, if this is the case, I shall feel in no way aggrieved, and shall serve just as cheerfully

under his orders as I hope you will under mine so long as I command you."

There was a general chorus of "No fear of that, Chris. We all know you well enough to be sure that we have made a good choice. We knew it before we left Johannesburg, but your pluck in walking up to that Boer with his loaded rifle clenched the matter."

"Well, we shall see," Chris said. "I shall do my best, but, as I said, the moment you want a change I shall be ready to resign; and now I think that we may as well turn in. It is nine o'clock, and we must be up at daybreak. Squads number one and two will each furnish a man for the first watch, taking the first on the list alphabetically. At eleven they will be relieved by two from squads three and four; then one and two furnish the next pair, and so on. Four watches will take us on till daybreak. The two of each squad who will be on duty to-night turn in to the same tent together, then the others will not be disturbed."

The blankets were spread in the little shelter tents, and all except the two men on duty were soon asleep. Chris had a tent to himself, there being an odd number, and an extra waterproof sheet had been carried for this purpose. Before leaving Maritzburg twenty-two poles, a little longer than cricket stumps, had been made under Chris's direction. They were shod with iron, so that they could be driven into hard ground. At the top was a sort of crutch, with a notch cut in it deep enough to hold another of the same size. Twenty-two other sticks of the same length were to form the ridge-poles. Half these were provided with a long brass socket, into which its fellow fitted. The whole, when they were accom-

panied by the spare horses, would be packed with their stores and spare blankets. At other times each rider would carry two of the poles strapped to his valise behind him.

Chris was the first to stir in the morning. There was but the slightest gleam of daylight in the sky, but he at once blew a whistle that he had bought that evening in the town, and heads appeared almost immediately at the entrances of the other tents, and in half a minute all were out, some alert and ready for business, others yawning and stretching themselves, according to their dispositions.

"First of all, let's put on the nose-bags and let the horses have a meal," Chris said; "then set to work to groom them. Remember, there must not be a speck of yesterday's dust left anywhere."

All were soon hard at work. The Kaffirs stirred up the embers of the fire, which they had replenished two or three times during the night, hung the kettles again over it, and cut up slices of ham ready to fry. By half-past five Chris, after inspecting all the horses closely, declared that nothing more could be done to them. Then they were saddled, the valises, with a day's provisions and a spare blanket, being strapped on. Then all had a wash, and made themselves, as far as possible, tidy. By this time breakfast was ready, and they had just finished their meal when a party of horsemen were seen in the distance. Rifles were slung over their shoulders, and bandoliers and belts full of cartridges strapped on, and they donned their forage-caps after coiling up the picket-ropes and halters and fastening them with their valises to the saddles. Then they mounted and formed up in line just as the general, with two of his staff, rode up. After saying a few words

to Chris, the general examined the horses and their riders closely.

"Very good and serviceable," he said, "and a really splendid set of horses. Of course, gentlemen, you would look better if you were in uniform, but for your purpose the clothes you have on are far more useful. Let me see you in your hats; I can then better judge how you would pass as Boers."

The lads all slipped their forage-caps in their pockets, and put on their felt hats, which were of different shapes and colours. As they had agreed beforehand, they at once dropped the upright position in which they had been sitting, and assumed the careless, slouching attitude of the Boers.

"Very good indeed," the general said with a laugh. "As far as appearances go, you would pass anywhere. The only criticism I can make is that your boots look too new, but that is a fault that will soon be mended. A few days' knocking about, especially as I fancy we are going to have bad weather, will take the shine out of them, and, once off, take good care not to put it on again. A Boer with clean boots would be an anomaly indeed. Now, I will detain you no longer."

The only manœuvre the boys had to learn was the simple one of forming fours. This they had practised on foot, and performed the manœuvre with fair accuracy. Then Chris gave the word, and, after saluting the general, led the way off at a trot.

"They are a fine set of young fellows," the general said to the two officers with him. "They are all sons of rich men, and have equipped themselves entirely at their own expense. They are admirably mounted, and, provided they are not caught in an ambush, are not likely to see the inside

of a Boer prison. It says a good deal for their zeal that they are ready to disguise themselves as Boer farmers instead of going in for smart uniforms. However, they are right; for, speaking Dutch, as I hear they all do, they should be able singly to mingle with the Boers and gather valuable information."

As soon as they were fairly south of the town, Chris said:

"Now our work begins. Number one squad will make its way towards the river and follow its course, keeping always at a distance from it, so that while they themselves would escape notice, they can ascertain whether any bodies of the enemy are this side of it, or within sight beyond the other bank. Number four will take the right flank, and keep a sharp look-out in that direction. Squads two and three will, under my command, scout between the flanking parties, and examine the farmhouses and the country generally. The whole will, as I said last night, maintain a distance of about three hundred yards apart, and each man will as far as possible keep those next to him on either hand in sight."

The two flanking companies started off, those under Chris separating as they rode off until they were as far apart as he had ordered, and then moving forward. When on level ground they went fast, but broke into a walk whenever they came to the foot of rising ground, and when near the top halted, dismounted, and crawled forward. Each man carried a Union Jack about the size of a handkerchief, elastic rings being sewn to two of the corners. When necessary these flags could be slipped over the rifles, and a signal could be passed from one to another along the whole line—to halt

by waving the flag, to advance by holding the rifles steadily erect. Other signals were to be invented in the future. Chris took his place in the centre of the line, in readiness to ride to either flank from which a signal might be given.

For five or six miles no signs of the enemy could be perceived. Most of the fields were entirely deserted, but round a few of the scattered farmhouses animals could be seen grazing, and these Chris set down as belonging to Dutch farmers who had no fear of interference by the Boers, and were prepared to join them as soon as they advanced. Many of these, indeed, during the past fortnight had trekked north, and were already in the ranks of the enemy. Presently Chris, who was constantly using his glasses, saw the flutter of a flag on a hill away to the left, and a minute later the signal to halt passed along the line. It had been agreed that signalling by shot should not be attempted unless the enemy seen were so far distant that they would not be likely to hear.

"What do you see, Brown?" Chris said as he reached the lad who had first signalled.

"There are a good many men and animals round a farmhouse about two miles away. The house lies under the shoulder of a hill to the left, I suppose that that is why the others did not see it."

Dismounting, Chris crawled forward with the other until he could obtain a view across the country. As Brown had said, the farmhouse stood at the foot of the line of hills they were crossing, and was fully a mile nearer to those on the right flank than to the point from which he was looking at it, but hidden from their view. Bringing his glass to bear upon it, he could distinctly make out that some forty or fifty men were

moving about, and that a large quantity of cattle were collected near the house.

"It is certainly a raiding party," he said to his companion. "They are too strong for us to attack openly, at least if they are all Boers. It would not do to lose half our number in our first fight. Still, we may be able to frighten them off, and save the farmer, who is certainly a loyalist, and cattle. You gallop along the line as far it extends and order all to come over to the right. I shall go on at once and get a view of the ground close by. By the time they have all assembled we can see what had best be done."

Going back to their horses they started in opposite directions. In a few minutes Chris reached a point which he believed to be nearly behind the farmhouse, picking up some of the scouts by the way.

"I expect I shall be back in about a quarter of an hour," he said as he dismounted. "You, Peters and Field, may as well come with me, I may want to send back orders."

They walked forward fast until so far down the hill that they could obtain a view of the farmhouse. The moment they did so they lay down, and made their way across some broken ground until they were within a quarter of a mile of it; then, seated among some rocks, they had a look through their glasses, and could see everything that was passing as clearly as if they had been standing in the farmyard. It was evident the Boers had only arrived there a short time before Brown noticed them. Parties of two or three were still driving in cattle, others were going in and out of the house, some returning with such articles as they fancied and putting them down by their horses in readiness to carry them off. Two men and some women and chil-

dren were standing together in a group; these were beyond doubt the owners of the farmhouse.

"How many Boers do you make out? I have counted thirty-eight."

Peters had made out forty, and Field forty-three, the difference being accounted for by those going in and out of the house and sheds.

"Well, we will say forty-five, and then we sha'n't be far wrong. We certainly can't attack that number openly, but we may drive them off empty-handed if we take them by surprise." He examined the ground for another minute or two, and then said: "I think we might make our way down among these rocks to within three hundred yards of the house. I will send six more down to you. With the others I will go down farther to the left, and work along in that little donga running out into the flat a hundred yards to the east of the house. You keep a sharp look-out in that direction, and you will be able to see us, while we shall be hidden from the Boers. We shall halt about three hundred yards beyond the house. As soon as we are ready I will wave a flag, then you and your party will open fire. Be sure you hide yourselves well, so that they may not know how many of you there are; they are certain, at the first alarm, to run to their horses and ride off. Directly they do so we will open fire on them, and, finding themselves taken in flank, they are likely to bolt without hesitation. Don't throw away a shot if you can help it, but empty your magazines as fast as you can be sure of your aim. Between us we ought to account for a good many of them."

"I understand, Chris; we will wait here till the others join

us, and then, as you say, we will work down as far as we can find cover."

Chris at once returned to the main party, who had by this time all assembled. "We can bring our horses down a good bit farther without being seen," he said. "There is a dip farther on with some rough brushwood. We had better fasten them there; they have learned to stand pretty fairly, but they might not do so if they heard heavy firing."

Leading their own horses and those of Field and Peters they walked down to the spot Chris had chosen, and there threw the reins over the horses' heads as usual, unfastened the head-ropes, and tied them to the bushes. Chris had already explained the situation to the troop, and had told off six of them to go down to join Peters. He now advanced cautiously with these till he could point out to them exactly the spot where the two scouts were lying. Then he returned to the others, and they walked along fast until they came upon the break in the hill, which lower down developed into a depression, and was during the rains a water-course. Down this they made their way. On reaching the bottom they found it was some twelve feet below the level of the surrounding ground.

A couple of hundred yards farther they could tell by the sound of shouting, the bellowing of cattle, and other noises, that they were abreast of the farmhouse, and going another three hundred yards they halted. Chris went up the bank until he could obtain a view, and saw that he was just at the spot he had fixed on. Making signs to the others, they took their places as he had directed, some ten yards apart. Then he raised his rifle after slipping the little flag upon it. A

moment later came the crack of a rifle, followed by other shots in quick succession. Chris, with his eyes just above the level of the ground, could see all that was passing round the farmhouse. With shouts of alarm the Boers at once rushed towards their horses, several dropping before they reached them. As they rode out from the yard the magazine rifles kept up a constant rattle, sounding as if a strong company of troops were at work. Chris waited until they were nearly abreast of his party, and then fired.

His companions followed his example, and in a moment a fire as rapid and effective as that still kept up from the hill was maintained. This completed the stampede of the enemy. They were soon half a mile away, but even at that distance the Mauser bullets continued to whistle over and among them, and they continued their flight until lost in the distance. Chris's whistle gave the signal for ceasing fire, and the two parties sprang to their feet, gave three hearty cheers, and then ran towards the farmhouse. In the yard lay five Boers and seven or eight horses; the riders had jumped up behind companions, for, as they passed, Chris had seen that several of the animals were carrying double. The little group, so lately prisoners, advanced as they came up, almost bewildered at the sudden transformation that had taken place, their surprise being increased on seeing that they had apparently been rescued by another party of Boers, and still more when, on their reaching them, they found that these were all mere lads.

"We are a party of Maritzburg Scouts," Chris said, with a smile at their astonished faces; "though, as you see, we are got up as Boers so as to be able to get close to them without

exciting suspicion. We were fortunate in just arriving in time."

"We thank you indeed, sir," the settler said, "for you have saved us the loss of all our property, and, for aught I know, from being carried off as prisoners. We were intending to trek down to Ladysmith to-day, and had just driven in our herds when the Boers arrived. If they had been content with stealing them, they would have been away before you arrived; but they stopped to plunder everything they could carry off, and, as I should say, from noises that we heard in the house, to smash up all the furniture they could not carry off. We are indeed grateful to you."

"We are very glad to have had the chance of giving the plunderers a lesson," Chris said. "It will make them a little cautious in future. But I think that you are wise to go at once, for there are certainly parties between this and Elandslaagte, where they have cut the line; so I should advise you to travel west for a bit before you strike down to Ladysmith. We have not heard of any of them being beyond the line of railway yet. Now we have work to do. Number one and two squads will at once go up and fetch down the horses, number three and four will examine the Boers who have fallen here and out on the plain, and will bring in any who may be only wounded."

He went out with this party; they found that eight more had fallen. Three of these lay at a short distance from the farmhouse, and had evidently fallen under the fire of the party on the hill; the others had been hit by those in the ambuscade. Altogether ten horses had been killed. Five of the Boers were still alive.

"Have you a spare cart?" Chris asked the farmer.

"Yes, I can spare one. Fortunately I have a small one besides two large waggons. May I ask what you want it for?"

"I want it to carry these wounded men to within reach of their friends. Which is the nearest drift?"

"Vant's Drift, and it is there, no doubt, that the party crossed. It is a little more than two miles away."

"Then we will place the wounded in the cart, and you might send one of your Kaffirs with it to the drift and stick up a pole with a sheet on it; they are sure to have halted on the other side, and will guess that there are wounded in it. As soon as the Kaffir comes within two or three hundred yards of the river he can take the horses out and return. I dare say he will be back again before you are off."

The cart was driven along the line that the Boers had taken, the wounded being carefully lifted and placed in it as it reached them. Two more were found dead and three wounded some distance beyond the spot where the searchers had turned, having fallen nearly a mile from the farm; the lads who accompanied the cart then returned. Long before they reached the house the horses had been brought down. The settler and his Kaffirs were hard at work loading the stores into two ox-waggons. The lads all lent their assistance, and in less than an hour the settlers started for Ladysmith, the women and children in the waggon, and the men on horseback driving their herds with the aid of the Kaffirs. After a hearty adieu, Chris and his party rode on together for some little distance before again scattering widely to recommence their work of scouting. Hitherto they had been too busy for conversation, but now they were able to give words to the satisfaction they all felt at their success.

"It has been splendid!" Sankey said enthusiastically. "We have defeated a force twice as strong as ourselves, have killed or badly wounded eighteen of them, and you may be sure that of those that got away several must have been hit. Not one of us has a scratch."

"Splendid!" another exclaimed. "It could not have been better managed. I think we ought to give three cheers for Chris."

Three rousing cheers were given. "After this, Chris," Carmichael said, "I don't think you need talk any more about resigning the command. General Symons himself could not have done better."

"I think, at any rate, we have begun to wipe off old scores," Chris said. "We have paid for a few of the insults the ladies had to submit to as we came along, and I am heartily glad that we were in time to do it. We have baulked them of the haul they expected to make, and saved something like a thousand head of cattle for the colony, to say nothing of preventing these people from being absolutely ruined. It is only a pity that we had not our horses with us. If we had, not many of the Boers would have recrossed the river. But we could not have taken them with us without being detected before we got into position, and in that case we might have had a hard fight, and matters would probably have turned out altogether differently."

There was a general expression of assent, for all felt that in an equal fight the Boers, being twice their own numbers, would have been more than a match for them. It was evening when they returned to Dundee, having come across no more Boers during the day's work. Directly they arrived at the little

camp, where they had left the tents standing in charge of their two Kaffirs, Chris wrote a short report of their doings, stating briefly that they had come upon a party of forty-five Boers in the act of driving off the cattle and sacking the house of Mr. Fraser, a loyal settler. Having dismounted and divided into two parties, they had attacked the Boers and driven them off, with the loss of ten killed and eight seriously wounded left on the field. Many of their horses had been killed. The wounded Boers had been sent in a cart to Vant's Drift, and the farmer and his herds had been escorted as far as the line of railway, which they had crossed and were making for Ladysmith. There had been no casualties among his party.

Field rode over with this report and delivered it at head-quarters, remaining to ask whether there were any orders for the next day. When he returned he brought a line from the general. It contained only the words, "I congratulate you most heartily. The affair must have been managed excellently, and does you all the greatest credit. Continue scouting on the same line to-morrow."

The lads were all highly delighted when Chris read this aloud, and then sat down to a well-earned meal, which was the more enjoyed as it had been voted that Field, as one of the finance committee, should go into the town and buy half a dozen of champagne in honour of their first victory. In the course of the evening one of the general's staff rode into camp on his way to town, having been requested by him to obtain full particulars of the fight at Fraser's farm. He took his seat by the fire with them, and Chris gave him a full account of their proceedings.

"Upon my word, Mr. King," he said, "you managed the

matter admirably; no cavalry leader could have done it better."

"There is no particular credit about the management," Chris said; "we acted just as we should have done had we been stalking a herd of deer instead of a party of Boers. One always manages, if possible, to put a party on the line by which they are likely to take flight, before crawling up within shot. If we could have taken our horses down with us before we opened fire we should have done so, and being so well mounted, I think few of them would have got away; but we could not manage it without risking being seen, and in that case the Boers, on making out what our strength was, would certainly have shown fight; and even if we had beaten them, which I don't suppose we should have done, we should have suffered heavily."

"You were quite right not to risk it," the officer said; "we know by old experience that the Boers are formidable antagonists when behind shelter, and, accustomed as they are to shooting on horseback, I dare say they will do well when not opposed by regular cavalry, who, I am convinced, would ride through and through them. I am quite sure that in the open they will not be able to make any stand whatever against infantry, which is the more important, as in so hilly a country as Natal our cavalry would seldom be able to act with advantage."

In the course of conversation he told them that there was no news of any large body of the Boers being near. Joubert's force had not moved out of Newcastle, and nothing had been heard of the Free Staters or of the Utrecht force under Lucas Meyer. "We have sentries on all the lower hills round here

and Glencoe, and there is no fear of our being surprised. The sooner they come the better, for we are all longing to get at them; and I can tell you we felt quite jealous when we heard of your spirited affair to-day. I can assure you that we shall have a greater respect for the volunteers than we had before, and if all do as well as you have done to-day they will be a most valuable addition to our force."

After their visitor had left, they sat chatting round a fire till ten o'clock, and then turned in.

CHAPTER V

THE FIRST BATTLE

ALL in the little camp, save the two sentries, slept soundly until, at two in the morning, they woke with a sudden start. A deep boom and a strange rushing sound was in their ears. With exclamations of surprise they all scrambled out of their tents.

"What is that?" Chris asked the sentry.

"It is a big gun on the top of that high hill they call Talana. We saw the flash of light, and directly after heard the report, and a rushing sound. I suppose it was a shot overhead; if it had been a shell we should have heard it burst and seen the flash. It must have been fired at the camp."

The horses, startled by the report, were plunging and kicking, and the lads at once ran to their heads and patted and soothed them. Not until they were quiet did they gather again.

"What time is it?" Chris asked.

"The clock on the church struck two a few minutes ago," Brown, who was on sentry, said. As he spoke another gun boomed from Talana, or, as it was generally called in the town, Smith's Hill, from a farm owned by a settler of that name at its foot. It was about a mile and a half east of the town, and therefore some three miles from the camp.

"It must be a very heavy gun by its sound—as big as the largest of those we have heard fired from that fort above Johannesburg. Joubert must have started from Newcastle early to have managed to get it up there by this time, or it may be the force from Utrecht; anyhow, they must be strong to venture to attack us in this way. We may as well saddle up, though it is hardly likely the cavalry will be engaged. I shall not send to camp for orders; the general will have enough to think about, and it will make no matter where twenty men place themselves. However, I shall ride over to camp and see what is going on there; it is likely enough that there will be an attack by the Free Staters on the other side. Carmichael and Horrocks, do you run into the town and see what is going on there. I will not start till you get back; if any of the staff see me they may ask some questions about it."

In a quarter of an hour the two lads returned. The people there were completely scared at the unexpected attack, and the streets were full of half-dressed men; however, they seemed to be getting over their first terror, now that they found it was the camp and not the town that was being fired at, and the volunteer corps was already gathering in readiness for orders.

We may be pretty sure that nothing will be done till daylight," Chris said. "Our men know the ground now, and

none of the Transvaal Boers can do so, and I don't think they will venture to move till they can see their way about. I am glad, indeed, that most of the women and children were sent off two days ago, and that the scare on the evening that we arrived, when the news came of the railway being cut at Elandslaagte, sent the greater part of the men who had remained behind, and who did not mean fighting, off by road. If they bombard the town they may do damage to property, but there will be no great loss of life. You had better give the horses a feed—that is, if they are disposed to eat at this hour—while I am away."

On reaching the camp, Chris found all the troops under arms. They had been roused before the Boer fire began, as a picket to the east of Dundee had been attacked and driven in. It was not, however, supposed that the Boers were in force until their guns opened fire. All lights were out in the camp, and the enemy's shot had gone wide. It was by no means clear why the Boers should have betrayed their presence on the top of the hill until it was light enough for them to use their guns with effect. Chris had, before starting, put on his flat cap.

As he approached the camp he was challenged by a sentry: "Who comes there?" and on his replying, "An officer of the Maritzburg Scouts," the sentry called out: "Advance, officer of the Maritzburg Scouts, and give the countersign."

Fortunately, as it happened, the officer had given it to Chris on his visit to their camp, and he therefore answered at once, "Ladysmith," and was relieved when the sentry called out, "Ladysmith pass, and all is well."

When he entered the camp he found the men were standing

in lines, but at ease, with their rifles piled in front of them, and there was a hum of conversation in the ranks. At the head-quarter tents everybody was astir. Presently an officer came up.

"Who are you?" he asked as he advanced.

"I am in command of the party of Maritzburg Scouts."

"Mr. King, is it not?" the officer asked.

"Yes, sir. I have ridden in to ask if there are any orders."

"No, and there will be none issued until it is daylight, and we can make out how matters stand and what is the force of the Boers. It is not likely that you will have any special orders, but can act with the cavalry and mounted infantry."

"Thank you, sir. Then I will ride back at once."

On returning to camp he said: "There is nothing to be done till morning. So far they have no idea of the force of the Boers. This is just the work we were formed for. Peters, you and Field and Horrocks certainly speak Dutch better than any of the others. It is half-past two now, and we have at least two and a half hours of darkness, therefore I propose we try to find out what force the Boers have got up there. It is no use for more than four of us to go, so the others can turn in, except the two sentries; but all will, of course, be ready to mount in case any party of Boers should come down upon the town before it is light. The next time I want three men on special duty I will give others a chance."

"Shall we ride, Chris?"

"I think so. Of course it will be more difficult getting up there in the dark; but I shall make a detour of three or four

miles, and come up on the other side, and we should be much more likely to be questioned if we were on foot than on horseback. Should we come upon any party of armed Boers, remember we have just arrived from Standerton, and, finding when we got to Newcastle that the force had moved on and were to take up their station at Talana Hill, we rode on to overtake them. When we get fairly there among them we will dismount; Field and Peters will stand by the four horses, Horrocks and I will go on. If you hear a row, you will mount and wait a minute or two, and then if we do not come, you will ride off with our horses as well as your own. We shall try and make our way to the edge of the hill, and ought to be able to slip away in the darkness if we can get there before we are shot down or overtaken. However, I don't think there is much chance of our being recognized. Indeed, I expect most of them will be lying down for a sleep before the time comes for action. If there is one thing a Boer hates it is being kept awake at night. I will take one of the Kaffir boys with us. They can see in the dark a great deal better than we can; and as the Boers are sure to have some natives with them, he is quite as likely to pick up news as we are—more so, perhaps, for the natives will sit and talk all night while their masters are snoring. I think the one we call Jack is the sharpest."

Jack was called up, and on being told what was required, at once agreed to accompany them.

No time was lost. Chris and his three companions mounted, and with the Kaffir running alongside they set off at a trot. Keeping to the north of east, they rode on for some two miles, Jack leading the way with as much ease as if

it had been daylight. When they had, as they calculated, come upon the ground the Boers must have passed over, they turned south, and kept on until they saw the dark mass of Talana on their right, and made towards it. On this side the hill sloped gradually, while on that facing Dundee it was extremely steep and strewn with boulders. They were now going at a walk, and they soon came upon an immense gathering of waggons, carts, oxen, and ponies, crowded without any order, just as they had arrived two hours before.

"There is no fear of our being detected," Chris said in a whisper, "and we can't do better than stop here. There is no getting the horses through this crowd, and if we did manage to do so there would be no getting them back, certainly not in a hurry. You had better lie down beside them, it is not likely that any Boers will be coming up or down. If the whole camp is like this there is not the slightest fear of our getting caught."

Jack had already been instructed that when he got into the camp he was to leave them and join any party of Kaffirs he found awake, and talk to them as if he were one of the bullock-drivers. As Chris and his companions returned, the former would blow his whistle softly, and he was then to make his way down to the horses at once.

Passing on unquestioned they neared the top of the hill, having left the mass of vehicles behind them. There were, however, large numbers of ponies assembled here in readiness should their masters require them. Hitherto they had heard no voices since entering the camp, but as they went farther they heard talking. Here the fighting men were assembled. For the most part they were lying down; some were asleep;

M 633

CHRIS AND HIS COMPANIONS SCOUTING

others, however, were moving about, and joining or leaving groups gathered together discussing the events of the next day. Horrocks and Chris now separated and joined different parties, some twenty yards from each other. They attracted no attention whatever. Their appearance in their broad hats and rough clothing, their bandoliers and rifles, was precisely similar to that of the men standing about.

No doubt whatever that the morning would bring them a brilliant victory, appeared to be entertained by the enemy. The artillery would first crush that of the British, then they would charge down and finish the affair. "They say that they have less than four thousand altogether," one said. "We are as many, and, as everyone knows, one Boer is a match for any three rooineks. It will not be a fight, it will be a slaughter. We shall stop a day to gather the plunder and send it off in the waggons, then we shall go south and destroy the force at Ladysmith. Three days later we shall be in Maritzburg, and within three or four days afterwards shall drive the British on board their ships at Durban. We shall get grand plunder there and at Maritzburg. But I think it is time now to take a hand at building up that wall along the front. Ebers' commando have been at it for three hours, and it is our turn now."

There was a general movement, which was accelerated by a sharp order, and a minute later Horrocks and Chris again came together and moved on with the others. Three hundred yards farther they came upon six guns, beyond which a number of men were at work carrying and placing great stones to form a rough wall. These left off their work as soon as the party arrived. Having now seen all that was necessary, the

two lads joined them and returned with them down the hill. The others threw themselves down near their horses, but Chris and his companion went on. Through the huge gathering of waggons they made their way with great difficulty, Chris giving a low whistle occasionally. At last they were through the camp. Jack was standing by the horses, and Peters and Field at once rose to their feet. Without a word they mounted, and rode without speaking till they were some little distance from the waggons.

"You are back earlier than I expected," Field said. "You have been gone scarcely an hour."

"No; the only difficulty we had was making our way through the mass of waggons and animals all mixed up higgledy-piggledy, and there has been no more excitement than if we had been walking through Dundee. We have got all we wanted to know. Their strength is about four thousand. They have six guns. They are building a stone wall along the brow of the hill, and they are cocksure that they are going to thrash us without difficulty."

Field and Peters laughed.

"They are fools to count their chickens before they are hatched," the latter said. "If they think it is going to be another Laing's Nek business they will find themselves mightily mistaken, though it will be a very difficult business to scale that hill from the other side under such a rifle fire as they will keep up."

Jack had now taken his place ahead of them again, and kept there with ease, although they broke into a canter as soon as they reached the level ground. In half an hour they reached their camp.

"Now, Jack," Chris said when he had dismounted, "we have not heard what news you have picked up."

"Not much news, baas. Talk with some Kaffirs; all hope that we beat them to-day, but think we cannot do so. Too many Boers and big guns. They say Boers very angry because the other commandos not here, and Free State Boers not arrived. They sure going to beat the rooineks, but are afraid that some may get away. If Joubert and Free Staters here, catch them in a trap and kill them all."

Such was the substance of Jack's answer in his own language. By this time the rest of the party had turned out to hear the news. They had had but little sleep, for all were intensely anxious as to the fate of their four comrades, and although delighted that they had returned safely, were a little disappointed on finding that the affair had been so tame and unexciting. While they were talking the two Kaffirs had stirred up the fire, put some wood and some coal on, and hung up the kettle.

"That is right, Jack," Chris said; "day will begin to break in half an hour, and we may have to be moving."

All was quiet until half-past five, and the lads had just finished their meal when the Boer guns opened fire, and two or three minutes later those of the British replied.

"It is an uncomfortable feeling sitting here with that terrific roaring noise overhead," Chris said. "One knows that there is not the slightest risk of being hit, but, to say the least of it, it is very unpleasant. There, a shell has just burst over the camp. So it is shell that they are firing."

Indeed, the Boers had been using these missiles only, but owing to some fault in the loading, or the badness of the fuses,

they fell for the most part without bursting. It was soon evident to the lads that the range of the British guns was shorter than that of the heavier pieces from Talana. The distance was five thousand yards, and the elevated position of the Boer guns added to the advantage given by their superior weight.

"I will ride in now," Chris said as he got up from breakfast, "and tell the staff what we have gathered as to the Boers' strength." He had on his way down the hill exchanged his hat for his forage-cap, and taking Horrocks with him he galloped to the camp. Sir Penn Symons was standing on a small elevation watching the fire. Chris rode up and saluted.

"I have no orders for you, Mr. King, except that when the fighting is over you will join the cavalry in pursuit."

"Thank you, sir; I have not come for orders, but to report to you that with Mr. Horrocks and two others, and one of our Kaffir servants, I entered the Boer camp last night in order to ascertain their strength."

"You did!" the general exclaimed in surprise. "You hear that, gentlemen?" he said, turning round to three or four of his staff standing but a short distance behind him. "Mr. King and three of his party absolutely entered the Boer camp last night to discover their force. Well, sir, what was the result?"

"There are about four thousand of them, sir, over rather than under, and they have six guns, all of heavy calibre. When I was there they were at work building a thick wall some five feet high of rough stones along the edge of the hill. It will scarcely shelter the guns, but it will provide cover for the riflemen at the edge of the hill. There is an immense gathering of waggons and carts—there are certainly not less

than a thousand of them—in a confused mass behind the hill. Arriving in the dark, each seems to have gone on until it could get no farther. The fighting men are all on the top of the hill, and between them and the waggons are their ponies. They certainly could not ride away till the waggons have been passed through, but possibly a passage may have been left on each side of these for them to get through, in order, as is their intention, to charge your army when their guns have silenced your artillery. I gathered that expected commandos had not come up. They were disappointed at hearing nothing of the Free Staters, who they expected would have attacked Glencoe from the other side. They are absolutely confident of success, and expect to overwhelm General White at Ladysmith in three days from now, and to be in Pietermaritzburg in a week, and are talking of driving the last rooinek on board the ships at Durban shortly after."

The general smiled. "I am much obliged to you for your information, Mr. King, and am much pleased at the courage with which you and your companions entered the Boer camp to obtain it. It is satisfactory to learn that their force is not much greater than our own. It is also useful to know that their ponies are gathered so close to them, for shells that go over the hill may burst among them; and I believe that one of the Boers' most vulnerable points is their horses, for without them they would feel absolutely lost. I am sure, Mr. King, that you would wish to be in the thick of the fighting, but I would rather that you curbed your impetuosity, for after the manner in which you obtained this news for me, I can see that your party will do far greater service in scouting and in gaining intelligence than they could afford in action.

I should advise you to shift your camp, as the troops are about to advance into the town, and the enemy's shot will soon be falling there."

A few minutes later two field-batteries moved forward and took up their position south of Dundee, escorted by the mounted infantry and the rifles. The third battalion of the Lancashire regiment remained to protect the camp should it be attacked by the Free Staters, while the Dublin Fusiliers and the Royal Irish Fusiliers were to march through the town to a donga or river-bed half a mile to the east. Beyond this the long ascent to Talana begins. The King's Royal Rifles were to take up a position under cover to the east of the town.

Chris had ridden back fast to Dundee. The work of taking down the tents and packing their materials and all the stores on to the spare horses took but a few minutes, and two of the lads went with the two natives and saw the horses safely placed in a sharp depression half a mile away, in which they would be safe from Boer shells. Chris had told his companions what the general had said. They all looked disappointed.

"We shall have plenty of opportunities afterwards, and it is a compliment that he considers we had better reserve ourselves for scouting, which, after all, is the work we always intended to carry out. Still, though, after what he has said, we cannot absolutely join the cavalry, we will manage somehow to see some of the fighting without getting into the thick of it. Besides, I should say that in any case the whole brunt of the affair must fall upon the infantry and artillery. If they silence the Boer guns and capture the hill, the battle is won, and the cavalry will have to wait for their chance till they can get the Boers to fight on ground where they can act."

Drizzling rain had now set in, but this and the fact that they had started without breakfast in no way abated the spirits of the troops who soon came along, marching with light step and eager faces which showed that they were delighted at the prospect of action. The batteries to the right had already come into play, and a vigorous cannonade was being directed at the crest of the hill, from which the Boer guns kept up a slower though steady fire in return.

"While nothing else is doing we may just as well ride over and see how things are getting on there," Chris said. And as soon as the two Irish regiments had passed, the little troop trotted across to the rising ground and dismounted a few hundred yards from the guns. They soon saw with satisfaction that the fire of the Boers was far from effective, their aim was not good, and a very small proportion of the shells burst; while on the other hand the shrapnel from the British batteries burst with splendid accuracy over the crest of the hill. For two hours the artillery duel continued, then the Boer guns gradually ceased their fire. The mist that had partly shrouded the summit of Talana, eight hundred feet above the plain, and the smoke that still hung thickly there, rendered it impossible to say whether they had all been put out of action or simply withdrawn, but when it cleared off they could no longer be seen.

It was now the turn of the infantry. Beyond the donga in which they were lying the rise of the ground was gradual, up to a plantation which surrounded Smith's farm. Beyond this the ground was rocky. The men advanced at the double in open order, and the moment they were seen by the Boers a continuous fire of musketry was opened. The distance was about a mile, but the Mauser rifles had a much greater

range than this and the bullets pattered thickly on the ground. Only four men, however, fell. The two regiments halted in the plantation and farm buildings, and the advanced line at the edge of the trees opened fire in answer to that to which they were exposed. The general at first had taken up his position with the guns, but as soon as the men advanced from the donga he joined them and accompanied them as far as the plantation. Then he returned to the battery, which continued its fire with greater activity to prepare the way for the farther advance of the infantry.

The Rifles had joined the two Irish regiments, and at half-past nine General Symons galloped up to the farm and gave the order for the advance. This was received with a cheer by the men, who had been impatiently awaiting it. Scarcely had the cheer died away when the general was mortally wounded by a bullet that struck him in the stomach. Unconscious that the wound was so severe he retained his seat a minute or two, and was then carried by the Indian bearer company into the town. The troops, ignorant of the misfortune that had befallen them, were now working their way up the hill, taking advantage of every stone and boulder, and although exposed to a terrific fire, gradually pushing on until they reached a stone wall which ran round the face of the hill. Beyond this the ground was much rougher and very much steeper —so steep, indeed, that it was almost impossible to climb it. The fire of the enemy was now terrific. The troops were some three hundred yards from the crest, and it was certain death to show a head above the wall. An officer placed his helmet on the end of his sword, and the moment he raised it it was riddled by five balls.

For a time it was impossible to advance farther, but when the Boer fire moderated a little the order ran along the line for the men to storm the position. A signal was made to the artillery to cease fire, and as it did so the men leapt over the wall and rushed forward. There was now no thought of taking shelter or returning the Boers' fire, every effort was needed for surmounting the difficulties in their way. In some places the rock was so steep that the men had to climb on their hands and knees, sometimes those below pushed their comrades up, and were in turn assisted by them to climb. The roar of musketry was unceasing. It seemed to be an impossibility for any man to reach the top unscathed, and yet there was no hesitation or wavering. Numbers fell, but, panting and determined, the rest pressed on. The Rifles suffered most heavily, and out of the seventeen officers who advanced with them five were killed and seven wounded. At last the steepest part of the ascent was surmounted. Those who first reached this point waited until joined by others, and then, fixing bayonets, they rushed up the slope to the edge of the plateau, cheering loudly.

The Boers did not await the onset; the great body had already fled. They had believed it impossible for mortal men to scale the hill under their continuous fire, and our steady advance through the hail of bullets had astounded them and shaken their courage. The artillery, after ceasing fire, had galloped off at full speed and taken up their position on the ridge known as Smith's Nek, overlooking the plain behind the hill. For a distance of three miles this was covered with waggons and galloping men. The guns were about to open fire upon them when a white flag was hoisted, and, believing

that the Boers had surrendered, the gunners abstained from firing. It was, however, but the first of numerous similar acts of treachery, and the Boers were thus enabled to make their escape.

The appearance of the plateau gained by the troops was appalling. Some five hundred of the Boers lay dead or wounded, and many had doubtless been carried off. Three of the guns lay dismounted, the others had been removed; for as they could not be sufficiently depressed to bear upon the stormers, they had been taken off as soon as the advance began in earnest. Beyond the plateau smashed waggons and dead animals lay thickly. Great numbers of the Boer ponies had been killed; many were still standing quietly waiting for their masters, lying dead above.

Pursuit was out of the question. The men were exhausted by their efforts; they were wet to the skin by the rain that had for nine hours come down unceasingly; they had had no food since the previous day, and the tremendous climb had taxed their powers to the utmost. For a time they cheered vociferously, the first joy of victory overcoming the thought of their dead and wounded comrades, who had to be collected and carried down. The loss had been severe; ten officers and thirty men had been killed, twenty officers and a hundred and sixty-five men wounded, and nine officers and two hundred and eleven men did not answer to the roll-call. This loss was unaccountable.

Chris, as soon as the infantry advance began, had, after talking with the others, agreed to set out in the direction in which the three squadrons of cavalry had started in the morning with instructions to work round, and be prepared

to cut off the enemy's retreat. They had with them some of the mounted infantry and a machine-gun.

As the whole Boer force would be concentrated on the hill, Chris thought that there would be no danger in riding round, especially as, even had the Boers posted a force to protect their line of retreat, he was confident that the speed of his horses would prevent any chance of capture. From some natives he learned the direction that the cavalry had taken, and presently, upon rising ground, saw two parties halted in hollows some two miles apart. The one farthest out on the plain appeared to be the largest, and to this he rode. The officer in command had seen him in camp, and as he saluted on riding up, said:

"So you have come to lend us a hand, sir? Can you tell me how matters are going on at Dundee?"

"At the time we rode off, sir, the advance of the infantry had just begun, the Boer guns had been silenced, and our men were advancing from Smith's farm under a very heavy fire of the enemy, which continued without intermission as long as we were within hearing distance."

"Did you see the other squadron as you came along?"

"They are in a hollow two miles away."

"Ah! that is where we left them."

The troopers were all dismounted, and the scouts followed the example. The boom of the British guns was continuing unabated.

"They can be getting on but slowly," the officer said. "I am afraid we shall find it a very tough job. I suppose there is a strong force up there?"

"Over four thousand."

"How do you know?"

"I was up there last night," Chris said, "with three of the others. We did not go up in these caps, as you may suppose, but in wide-brimmed hats. We were able to get about without exciting any suspicion whatever. We found they had six guns and over four thousand men. As we all speak Dutch fluently there was really no chance of our being detected."

The other officers of the squadron had all gathered round.

"Danger or no danger, it was a very plucky action," their leader said. "I suppose that was the news you brought in just before the troops marched off. Well, I wish that we had got our breakfast and the horses a feed before we started. It is more important for the horses than it is for us, though I should not be sorry for breakfast myself."

"We have some food in our haversacks, sir. We breakfasted before we started, and we filled our haversacks with biscuits, thinking that perhaps they would be welcome, for we knew that none of the troops had anything to eat before leaving."

"You are very good to offer it," the colonel said. "But we could not eat while the men have nothing."

"It will go round, sir, though it will be but a small portion for each. We each put about ten pounds of biscuits in our haversacks, and shall not be sorry to get rid of the weight. It will make something like three-quarters of a pound per man all round."

"More than that," the officer said. "I am indeed greatly obliged to you."

The haversacks were emptied and divided into four heaps of equal size, with a proportionate heap for the ten officers.

Four men were called up from each troop, and in a short time the soldiers were all munching biscuits, every man dividing his rations with his horse. The sight of the rough-looking troop had at first excited some amusement and a little derision among the soldiers, but this feeling was now exchanged for gratitude, and it was unanimously agreed that these young farmers were a capital set of fellows. The hours passed slowly until the officers, through their glasses, saw a great movement in the encampment on the hill. The waggons standing lowest separated from the others, and gradually a general movement set in.

"Our men must be gaining ground," the colonel said, "and the Boers are beginning to funk."

The bits were put into the horses' mouths again, the saddles buckled up tightly, and an expression of satisfaction succeeded that of disgust at the long hours standing in the pouring rain. Presently, when the leading waggons were abreast of them, at a distance of about a mile, the order was given to mount, and the two squadrons dashed across the plain and were soon among the fugitives. There were many mounted men among them, these being the first to steal away from the fight. They opened fire as the cavalry approached, but were soon overthrown or driven away in headlong flight. Many of the waggons were seized, but each moment their defenders became stronger. The Boers were now flocking down in great numbers, and seeing their teams and property in danger they dismounted, formed some of the waggons up in a square, and from them opened a heavy fire upon the troopers. Chris dismounted his party and returned the fire, but the officer in command, seeing that with so small a force of infantry he

could do nothing, and that the numbers of their enemies were increasing, drew off. He would have continued the fight, but he supposed that the artillery would soon be at work, and knew they could not open fire as long as he was engaging the Boers; he therefore retired with the long train of captured waggons, and late in the afternoon reached camp.

Nothing was seen of the other squadron and mounted infantry, nor was any news received of them until the following day, when a medical officer with some wounded men came in. Like the larger force, they too had ridden in among the waggons, but had taken a more northerly line, and had come on a point where the Boers were thickest. They had charged and taken several prisoners, and inflicted severe loss on the enemy. These, however, had swarmed round them, keeping up an incessant fire and barring their retreat. They took up a defensive position in a farm, and for three hours repelled all the attacks of the Boers, until their horses were all killed or had broken away and the ammunition exhausted, while the Boers had just brought up the three guns they had withdrawn from the hill. Further resistance would have ended in the extermination of the whole party, and Lieutenant-Colonel Möller was therefore obliged to surrender.

CHAPTER VI

ELANDSLAAGTE

THE scouts erected their tents again on their former ground. The remaining inhabitants of Dundee were jubilant over the victory that had been won, and did their best, by hanging

out flags from the windows, to decorate the town. Jack and his companion had returned to the camp with the spare horses as soon as the hill was carried, and had the fires lighted by the time the party came in. In spite of having worn their blankets as cloaks, all were wet through, but after changing their clothes, they went into the town to gather the news of how the hill had been won, and by the time they returned their meal was ready.

"What do you think of affairs, Chris?"

"I think that the officer at Ladysmith was right, and that it was a frightful mistake to divide the force and send four thousand men up here. They have thrashed the Boers to-day, but they may be back again on the top of that hill to-morrow. Besides, we know that Joubert's force was not engaged to-day, and they and the Free Staters will be gathering round. We might win another victory, but we are certain to be obliged to fall back soon, and my opinion is that we shall be very lucky if we get through safely."

"Why not start to-morrow morning, Chris?" Peters said. "We shall be of no use scouting here, and not much use if there is hard fighting. I hear that some natives have brought in the news that there was some firing to-day at Elandslaagte. If that is the case, we must have troops there, and the chances are that they will be there to-morrow."

"Yes, that is very likely," Chris agreed. "General White will be sure to hold the line there if he can, for he must feel sure that the force here will have to retreat now that it is attacked in earnest. When we were talking to-day to the cavalry, one of the officers mentioned that we had still telegraphic communication with Ladysmith, for although the

wires by the railway are cut, it is possible to communicate through Helpmakaar. The Boers seem to have forgotten that, for it is quite out of the direct line, and nearly double as far round. Well, as we had no orders to come here, I suppose there is no occasion to get orders to go back. I think Peters's proposal is a very good one, but on a point like this everyone ought to give an opinion. My view is that we might be a great deal more useful there than here, and that if we stop we shall run a great chance of being captured. I think that it would be a fair thing to put it to the vote."

He took two or three leaves out of his pocket-book, and tore them up into narrow slips of paper.

"Now," he said, "write 'Yes' if you are in favour of going back, 'No' if you are for stopping here. Drop them into my cap, and the majority shall decide."

When the strips of paper were examined, it was found that only two out of the twenty-one were in favour of remaining.

"That settles it," Chris said. "It is thirty miles down to Elandslaagte by road, and as from here to Glencoe is five miles, and we are no nearer there than we are here, by cutting across to Waschbank we shall have only five-and-twenty miles to ride. It is well that we should get there as early as possible, so we will settle to start at five o'clock, which will take us there by eight, in time to see anything that is going on. No doubt we shall be able to hear from natives as we go along whether the troops are still there; at any rate if they are, we are sure to hear firing before we get there, unless, of course, the Boers have retired."

The horses had already had an extra feed, and the Kaffirs

were warned of the hour at which they were going to start. The pack-horses were able to keep up with the rest, for their loads were by no means heavy — in fact, they carried less weight than the others. The two hundred pounds of biscuits given to the Hussars made no difference in their baggage, for this had been bought at Dundee, as the lads decided to keep their stores as far as possible intact for a time when they might for some days be away scouting in a district where no provisions could be obtained.

At four o'clock the sentries roused the others, and having taken a cup of coffee and some cold meat and bread, and led the horses down to the stream while the Kaffirs were loading up the packets and bundles, they mounted at five o'clock and set off at a trot; Jack and Japhet, a name suggested by Field, who was the wag of the party, were allowed to ride on two of the horses that carried the lightest burdens. All the lads were provided with compasses, but these were not necessary, as both the natives were well acquainted with the country, which was wild and mountainous.

When they reached Wessels station, nine miles from Elandslaagte, they heard the sound of guns. At this proof that there was still a force there, they turned off from the road, and, riding west, struck the point where the main road to Meran crossed the Sundays River, and then, still keeping a mile west of the line of railway, found themselves abreast of the station. Just as they did so, a body of mounted volunteers galloped up towards them. As soon as they were seen, they exchanged their hats for forage-caps, and some of them, by Chris's orders, hoisted their union-jacks on their rifles.

"It is well that you raised those flags," the officer in com-

mand said. "We made sure by your appearance that you were Boers, and rather took your change of caps as one of their slim devices, and had our rifles ready to give you a warm reception. I suppose you come from Dundee? We heard news yesterday evening of the battle, and were sorry to hear how heavy the losses were, and particularly of General Symons' wound. I suppose you have no later news?"

"No, beyond that we heard he was very dangerously hit indeed. He is either at the church or town-hall. Both have been turned into hospitals."

"There is a good deal of anxiety at Ladysmith," the officer said. "The general opinion is that, with the Boers closing in all round it, the position is a very serious one."

"I am afraid so, sir. There is nothing to prevent the Boers from returning to their position on Talana Hill to-day; and soon after we left the town this morning we heard the sound of guns away on the right, and supposed that the Free Staters had approached Glencoe. As mounted men are of very little use there, and our party is too small to be able to do any good, we thought it would be best to come back here, especially as there was a native report that there was firing in this direction."

"Yes; a part of our cavalry under French came up with a battery of field-artillery. There was a little skirmishing, but in the evening the Boers were strongly reinforced, and our cavalry returned to Ladysmith. It was only a reconnaissance to ascertain the general situation. To-day we are stronger. Squadrons of the 5th Dragoon Guards, 5th Lancers, the Natal mounted battery, and several detachments of mounted volunteers, including the Imperial Light Horse, and half the

Manchester Regiment, are coming up in an armoured train. I suppose that you are not attached to any other corps?"

"Yes; we form a section of Captain Brookfield's corps of Maritzburg Scouts. As you see, we are not in uniform; it being thought that, as we are all from Johannesburg, and speak Dutch and Kaffir, we should be of more use for scouting if able to appear as Boers."

"A very good idea," the officer said, "but somewhat dangerous, for if they caught you they would assuredly shoot you as spies."

"We don't mean to be caught if we can help it, as you see we are very well mounted."

"Uncommonly well. Brookfield's subscriptions must have come in handsomely for him to be able to buy such horses as those."

"We provide our own mounts and equipments," Chris said, "and consider ourselves very lucky in getting hold of this batch of horses from Mr. Duncan on the day he arrived at Maritzburg. I really think they were very cheap at sixty pounds each."

"They were not dear, certainly; and the fact that they came from him is in itself a sufficient recommendation. We have got some thirty from him, but they are a different stamp of animal and did not cost half that figure. And now we must be riding to join the rest of our fellows. We made you out when you were a couple of miles away, and were sent off to ascertain what you were. By the way, you will find Brookfield there. He arrived with his men by rail last evening."

Riding on, they soon came upon the mounted corps, and were warmly received by Captain Brookfield.

"You are back just in time," he said. "I suppose that you saw something of the fight yesterday, but, as I see your number still complete, you can scarcely have been in the thick of it?"

"We were with two squadrons of Hussars, and captured a good many waggons and did a little fighting, but nothing very serious. There were only a few casualties. We heard, however, from Colonel Yule, who has succeeded poor Symons, that up to ten o'clock last night another of the squadrons of the Hussars and a company of mounted infantry with them had not returned, and nothing was known of their whereabouts."

"Had they not got into camp when you started?"

"I did not hear, sir. In fact, we set off before daylight. But last night it was hoped that the squadron, which was acting independently, had lost their way, and would come in this morning. Where is the Boer force now?"

"Our batteries have shelled them out of the station. They were wholly unprepared for it, and bolted at once to those hills a mile and a half east of the line. Their camp lies at the bottom of that conical hill. You can make them out from here with your glass. There, French is moving forward."

The order had indeed been given to advance, the artillery accompanying the cavalry, and halting every two or three minutes to deliver their fire. The ground was flat, but cut up by gullies. As soon as they came within range, the colonials dismounted and added their fire to that of the guns. An immense confusion was seen to reign in the Boer camp, and thirty-seven British subjects, including the officials and staff at the railway-station, and some of the coal-miners, took advantage of this and ran forward to join their friends. They were

at once sent back into Ladysmith, after having given the information that General Koch was in command of the Boers, and that Commandant Miellof and the German Colonel Shiel, with many of the Johannesburg commando, were there. Chris and his comrades felt great satisfaction at the news.

"We have a chance of paying off old scores on the right persons now," Chris said. "I do hope that the fellows who insulted us when we were coming down are here, and that we shall manage to get among them."

For the time, however, this wish was not gratified. The Boers, now seeing that they had such a small force opposed to them, steadied themselves and opened fire with some guns, Maxims, and rifles from the crest of the hill, while a swarm of horsemen and dismounted men poured out to threaten the flanks of the British. The odds were too great; the comparatively heavy guns of the enemy were well aimed and served, and quite overpowered the fire of the light cannon of the field and mountain batteries. The order was given to fall back, which was done in good order, though the troops were harassed by a hot fire from the enemy concealed in the gullies. On reaching the high ground near Modder Spruit the country was more in favour of the British, who were now extended on each flank. The Boers were unable or unwilling to move their heavy guns from their position on the hill, and being now beyond their range, and exposed to the fire of our batteries as well as the infantry, those pressing forward fell back. General French had brought out a signalling apparatus with him, and the telegraph wires were tapped, and a message sent to General White asking him for reinforcements in order to carry the Boer position.

The fight now ceased for a time. A party of the Boers occasionally crept forward and opened fire, but the Colonial Horse dashed forward and sent them flying back to the hills. From nine o'clock till a quarter to two the troops remained idle, but the reinforcements then arrived, a battery of field-artillery, several squadrons of Dragoons, Lancers, and Colonials, and the Devonshire regiment and Gordon Highlanders, the infantry being brought up by train. These were under the command of Colonel Ian Hamilton, who had a thorough knowledge of Boer tactics, and knew how to handle his troops. It was well that it was so, for, led by a less experienced commander, they would have suffered terribly in their advance. While the infantry detrained, the Colonials, followed by the 5th Lancers, rode towards some low hills, whence some parties of Boers had maintained a distant fire. These were at once scattered. The infantry marched along some ridges parallel with the railway but a mile away, while the Devonshire regiment kept along the low ground by the line. The 5th Dragoon Guards, with some troops of Colonials and one of the field-batteries, moved forward on the left.

The Manchesters were on the right of the infantry, the Gordons in the centre, and the Devons on the left, as they set their faces towards the Boer position. At three o'clock the action began, the Boer riflemen opening a heavy fire. It was still too distant, however, to do any serious execution, and the British moved forward as regularly and unconcernedly as if it had been a field-day. The Boer fire grew in intensity, and one of our batteries opened with shrapnel to drive them from the lower ridges. At half-past three the Boer artillery joined their deeper roar to the rattle of musketry and the sharp cracks of

the British guns. Although it was still early the light was indistinct, for a heavy thunder-storm had been for some time brewing, and this burst before the heat of the action really began. The darkness was all in favour of the advancing infantry, who in their khaki uniforms were almost invisible to the Boers.

The troops were now in extended open order, and advanced towards the foot of the hill by rushes, taking advantage of the ant-hills that studded the plain and afforded an excellent cover, being high enough to cover them while lying down, and thick and compact enough to resist the passage of a Mauser bullet. The Highlanders were suffering the most heavily, their dark kilts showing up strongly against the light sandy soil, and while the Devons and Manchesters sustained but few casualties, they were dropping fast. They and the Manchesters were somewhat in advance of the Devons, who were guarding their flank, which was threatened by a large number of Boers gathered on the ridges on that side.

The storm was now at its height, the thunder for a time deadening the roar of the battle, but through the driving rain the infantry pressed on until they reached the foot of the Boers' hill. Large numbers of the enemy were on the slope, hidden from sight by the boulders, but these could not long maintain their position, for the British marksman shot as straight as the Boer. Our batteries, which had almost silenced those of the enemy, scattered their shrapnel among those higher up the hill, and as the Boers rose to fly before the bayonets of our cheering troops, they were swept away by volleys of the Lee-Metfords. So, with short pauses when shelter was obtainable, our troops bore upwards, cheering and even joking, until they reached the

last shoulder of the hill. The Boers made a short but plucky struggle, numbers pushing up from behind to help their comrades, but nothing could check the impetuosity of our troops. The magazines of the rifles were now for the first time set in action, and the Boer force withered away under the terrible storm of shot.

The men of the Imperial Light Horse, who had dismounted and joined in the advance, were fighting side by side with the Highlanders and Manchesters. The pace was now increased to a run, and, shouting and cheering, the men went forward with levelled bayonets. Many of the Boers, lying behind rocks, maintained their fire until the troops were within two yards of them, and then, rising, called for quarter. The men, furious at seeing their comrades shot down when all hope of resistance was over, would have spared none, had not the officers with the greatest difficulty restrained them from bayoneting the Boers, and many of these were in fact killed. As the troops, now joined by the Devons, were rushing down upon the camp the Boers raised a white flag, and the bugle sounded "Cease firing". The men halted for a moment, and then were advancing quietly when a tremendous fire broke out from the Boers, who were scattered over the ridges of the hillside and a slope leading to its summit.

Hitherto the British loss had been wonderfully small considering the storm of bullets through which they had passed, but numbers now dropped, and, taken wholly by surprise, the troops ran up the hill again. But not for long. Halting when they reached the crest, and furious at the treachery that had been practised with such success upon them, they turned again and rushed down the hill, scattering the Boers, who still clung

to their shelters, with their fire. It was just six o'clock when the Devons carried the last defence of the Boers and then with the Manchesters swept down into the camp. It was now the turn of the cavalry. These had in the darkness moved forward unnoticed, and the Lancers and Dragoons, with a few of the Colonials, among whom were the Maritzburg Scouts, fell upon the flying Boers and cut them up with great slaughter, and, although it was now quite dark, followed them for upwards of two miles, and then returned to camp.

The losses were heavy. The Gordons had lost four officers killed and seven wounded, and a total of a hundred and fifteen casualties among the four hundred and twenty-five men led into action. The Imperial Light Horse lost their colonel and had seven officers wounded, and eight men killed and forty wounded. Two hundred of the Boers lay dead upon the field. Their wounded were vastly more numerous, and most of the principal officers were killed or captured. General Koch, two of his brothers, a son, and a nephew were all wounded; Shiel, Viljeon, and many others killed or captured. Everything had been left behind. Three guns, all their baggage, their waggons, a great quantity of arms and ammunition, and many horses fell into the hands of the victors. Several battle flags were also captured, and two hundred prisoners were brought in by the cavalry. The night was a dreadful one, the rain still continued to come down, the cold was bitter, and it was next to impossible to find, still less to bring down, the wounded. Nevertheless the soldiers carried on the work during the greater part of the night. Boer waggons were turned for a time into hospital tents, and here by the light of their lanterns the surgeons laboured unweariedly in giving what

aid was possible to those brought in, whether Boers or Britons.

Chris and his band worked as hard as the rest, and carried down a great number of wounded; but in spite of all the exertions of the troops many remained on the hillside all night, the sufferings from their wounds being as nothing to that caused by the wet and cold. The lads' flasks were of great use now, and enabled many a man, too badly wounded to be carried down the rough hillside, to hold on till morning. General White had arrived from Ladysmith while the battle was going on, but he left the command in the hands of General French. On the following morning orders came for General French to retire, as strong parties of the enemy had been seen farther south, and it was hourly becoming more and more evident that it would be impossible to hold the country beyond Ladysmith, and many were of opinion that even this position was too far advanced.

The splendid valour shown by our soldiers at Dundee and Elandslaagte, and the heavy losses they suffered, had been practically thrown away. The coal-fields of Northern Natal had been lost, the loyal settlers had been plundered and ruined, Colonel Yule's force was in imminent peril, and all that had been obtained was the temporary possession of the two heights, both of which had to be relinquished on the following morning. Beyond showing the Boers how enormously they had underrated the fighting power of the British troops, no advantage whatever had been gained by the advance beyond Ladysmith.

Three of the Johannesburg Scouts had been wounded in the charge among the Boers. None of the injuries was severe, being merely flesh wounds, of which they were hardly conscious

during the fighting, and which would not be likely to keep them long from the saddle. None of them applied for medical assistance, as the surgeons were so fully occupied with serious cases. Their comrades bound up the wounds and placed them in the most sheltered position they could find, five of their comrades remaining in charge of them and the horses, there being no possibility of finding the two Kaffirs and the spare animals in the confusion and darkness.

"We have had one lesson," Chris said, as at seven in the morning the party assembled, worn out by their long night's work, "and that is, that blankets are well enough against a passing shower, but that when there is any probability of wet we must carry our waterproof sheets with us. Of course they would have been no good last night, but on occasions when there is no need for us to be using our hands they will be an immense comfort."

"But we should have been wet through before we lay down, Chris!"

"Yes, they would not have kept us dry, but they would have gone a long way towards keeping us warm. It would be like putting oilskin over wet lint; we should have felt as if we were in a hot poultice in a short time. And even while riding it would have been very comfortable, if we had worn them as we did the blankets, with a hole in the middle to put our heads through."

"But that would spoil them for tents," Carmichael said.

"Well, we could have flaps sewn so as to cover the hole."

"Our blankets were very useful last night," Horrocks remarked. "I don't know how we could have got many of those poor fellows down the hill if we had not carried them

in the blankets. It was infinitely easier for them, and a great deal easier for us. I saw lots of soldiers using theirs in the same way."

"Are you sure you will be able to sit your horses down to Ladysmith?" Chris asked Brown, Capper, and Harris, the three wounded.

All laughed. "One would think that we were babies, Chris," Harris said. "We could ride to Maritzburg if necessary, though I feel my arm rather stiff, and no doubt it will be stiffer still to-morrow. I felt a bit miserable at sunrise after lying there shivering, and envied you fellows who could keep yourselves warm by working; but I am beginning to thaw out now, and the sight of the Kaffirs coming towards us with the horses half an hour ago, and the thought of hot coffee, did even more than the sun to warm me."

"It will be ready soon," Willesden, who was specially in charge of the stores, said. "It was a capital idea bringing that large spirit-stove and the paraffin with us; even a native could not find any dry sticks this morning."

"Except as the soldiers have done," Chris said, pointing to where, a quarter of a mile from the spot where they had gathered, a dozen fires were blazing, the soldiers having utilized some of the Boer waggons that had been smashed by the shell for the purpose of firewood.

"Yes, but if we were by ourselves, Chris, there would be no broken waggons; besides, after all, I should not care to go down and scramble with the soldiers for a place to put a kettle on. At any rate, the stove will be invaluable out on the veldt."

"We all agree with you, Willesden," Peters said, "and it

was because you were the one who suggested it that we promoted you to the office of superintendent of the kitchen. It is a comfort, too, that we have some clear water instead of having to get it from one of those muddy streams. The storm has done good anyhow, for if it had not been for that there would have been no breakfast for the troops until they had moved to the river."

In another twenty minutes they were drinking hot coffee and munching biscuits. At ten o'clock the bugle sounded the assembly, and the troops formed up, the wounded were placed in ambulance-waggons or carried on stretchers, and all returned to Elandslaagte station. Here the wounded were sent on by train, while the infantry and cavalry returned by road. Talking to some of the officers of the Imperial Horse, several of whom were friends of his father, and had only left Johannesburg a short time before the declaration of war, Chris learned that the principal object in fighting the battle was to drive the Boers off the line by which the Dundee force would retreat; for Colonel Yule in his telegraphic despatch had stated, that although a victory had been won he felt that the position was untenable, and that he might at any moment be forced to evacuate it. He also learned that the safety of the line beyond Ladysmith was already threatened, but whether Sir George White would decide upon falling back towards Pietermaritzburg or would hold Ladysmith no one knew. Certainly nothing could be determined upon until General Yule rejoined with the division from Dundee.

The position there was indeed growing worse every hour. While the battle of Elandslaagte was being fought the Boers had opened fire from the hills above Glencoe on the British

camp, and had compelled it to shift its position. The next day they were again obliged to move by artillery on the Impati mountain, and it was then that General Yule decided to retire at once on Ladysmith. A cavalry reconnaissance which was sent out found that the Boers were in great strength in the pass of Glencoe, and it was therefore determined to move by the roundabout way through Helpmakaar. Some stores of ammunition that had been left under a guard in the other camp were fetched, and with full pouches the little army started on its long and perilous march at nine o'clock on the evening of the 22nd. The camp was abandoned as it stood. The wounded remained with some surgeons under the protection of the Red Cross flag. All the available transport accompanied the column, but the men's kits and all other encumbrances were left behind. They were obliged to pass through Dundee to get upon the southern road, but so quietly was the movement effected that but few of the townsmen knew what was happening.

The column was led by Colonel Dartnel, chief of the Natal Police, whose knowledge of the district was invaluable to the troops. The roads were heavy, and the rain continued to pour down in torrents. Each man carried three days' provisions; they tramped along silently through the night; stoppages by swollen streams were frequent, and by daybreak the next morning they had only accomplished nine miles of their journey. Early in the morning the townspeople had woke up to the fact that the army had gone, and there was a general exodus of all who could obtain conveyances. The Boers remained for some time in ignorance that the force whose capture or destruction they had regarded as certain had slipped

away. They saw the tents, but the fact that neither men nor horses were visible puzzled them, and it was eleven o'clock before some of the more venturesome, galloping down, found that the English force had escaped.

Then from all sides they poured into the town. Had they at once pursued they might still have overtaken the retreating force before nightfall; but they immediately set to work to loot the great stores of provisions left behind, and to gather their pickings from the deserted houses of Dundee, and so let slip their opportunity, and no pursuit whatever was attempted. For four days the column continued its march, resting for a few hours each day and usually marching all night. The road was terribly bad, leading through narrow mountain passes, and had but a small force of the enemy held the Waschbank gorge, where the sides were for three miles nearly perpendicular, a terrible calamity might have taken place. Happily, however, the Boers were in absolute ignorance of the road which the British troops were following, and concluded that they must have somewhere crossed the railway and were making their way down by the roads to its west. That they had gone through Helpmakaar does not appear to have occurred to them, for after marching some thirty miles to that town the column was as far off Ladysmith as when it started.

The anxiety at the latter town was intense. The line being still uncut, the arrival of the column at Helpmakaar was known, but beyond that no communication could be received. On Tuesday the 24th Colonel Dartnel arrived in Ladysmith with the news that the column was now twenty miles away, all well, and he at once returned to them with supplies and a small relief force. On Wednesday many of the men came

in, and on Thursday the remainder arrived and were heartily greeted. On the 24th—in order to divert the attention of Joubert and the Free State Boers, both of whom were converging upon General Yule's column, still making its way through the passes—a force composed of three regiments of cavalry, four of Colonial Mounted Infantry, three batteries, and four infantry regiments went out. The enemy were found near Reitfontein. No actual engagement took place, but for some hours an artillery and rifle duel was maintained and the Boers fell back. The number of casualties was not large, and these were principally among the Gloucester regiment, who, on entering a valley supposed to be untenanted, were received by a heavy fire from a strong party of the enemy hidden there. The fight, however, fulfilled the object for which the advance was undertaken, that of occupying the Boers' attention and enabling the column from Dundee to make its way into Ladysmith unmolested. The Boers were now closing in on the latter town from all directions, and preparations for defence at once began. The town-hall and the schools were fitted up as hospitals, and everything arranged for the reception of wounded. As the Boers had already been seen near Colenso, sixteen miles to the south, it was certain that the communications would ere long be cut.

No more unsuitable place for a military camp could well have been selected than Ladysmith, which had indeed been chosen, years before war was thought of, on account of its position on the railway, and the vicinity of the Klip river. The fact that the country immediately round was fertile and forage was obtainable no doubt influenced the military authorities in their selection. Lying in the heart of a mountainous

country, it was commanded by steep and rocky hills at a distance of from two to four miles. Just as many castles built in the days before firearms were in use were rendered untenable against even the clumsy cannon of early days placed on eminences near, so the improvement in artillery and the possession of powerful modern guns by the Boers had gravely imperilled the position of Ladysmith. The military authorities could never have anticipated that the town would be besieged by foes armed with artillery that could carry over five miles. But such was the case now, and all there felt, as soon as it was decided to defend the place till the last, that the position was a precarious one.

Fortunately, a considerable store of provisions had been collected, and so long as the line was open additions were being sent up by every train. The line was a single one, winding along through passes among the hills, and therefore open to attack by small bodies of the enemy. In point of size Ladysmith was the third largest town in Natal. Durban boasted a population of thirty thousand, Pietermaritzburg of twenty thousand, and Ladysmith of four thousand five hundred, being four hundred larger than that of Dundee. It was the point at which the line of railway forked, one branch running north through Glencoe to the Transvaal, the other northwest through Van Reenen's Pass to Bloemfontein. It was a pretty straggling town with its barracks, government buildings, and large stores. Almost all the houses were detached and standing in their own gardens, and as these were largely wooded its appearance was very picturesque, with the Klip river, a branch of the Tugela, running through it. The houses were, for the most part, one-storied, and the roofs were all

painted white for the sake of coolness. No perfectly open town had ever before undergone a siege by an army of some thirty thousand men provided with excellent guns, and yet the garrison awaited the result with perfect confidence.

CHAPTER VII

LADYSMITH BESIEGED

ON the 30th, the Boers being now in force on many of the hills round the town, and having inflicted the first annoyance upon Ladysmith by cutting the conduit that brought down the water-supply to the town from a reservoir among the hills, and so forced it for the future to depend upon a few wells and the muddy water of the river, it was determined to make an effort to drive them back and to gain possession of some of the hills from which it was now evident the town would stand a risk of being bombarded. Hitherto there had been considerable apathy in taking measures for keeping the enemy as far as possible out of range. A few redoubts thrown up during the last week and strongly held would have been invaluable, but it seemed to be considered by the military authorities that the siege could be but a short one, and that the Boers would speedily be driven off by the troops now pouring into Durban.

An effort was now to be made to repair the consequences of this remissness and to drive the Boers off the positions they occupied, and it was hoped that if a heavy blow were dealt them they would draw off altogether. The forces of Joubert,

Meyer, and the Free Staters were now all within a distance of a few miles, and all were to be beaten up. Their central position was on a hill afterwards known as Signal Hill, and on this they had already planted a forty-pounder gun. A force composed of six companies of the Royal Irish Fusiliers, four and a half of the Gloucesters, a mountain-battery and a troop of Hussars, started at midnight towards a hill known as Nicholson's Nek, occupied by the Free Staters. Major General Hunter with a brigade of infantry, three batteries, and a small cavalry force were to attack Meyer's commando to the east, while General White, with two infantry brigades, French's cavalry, and six batteries of field-artillery moved against Joubert's force on Modder Spruit. It was hoped that the Boers, if defeated, would find their retreat barred by the force that had started early for Nicholson's Nek. All were well away from the town before daylight broke.

At five o'clock in the morning the guns spoke out, and were at once answered by the Boer artillery, and the roar of fire soon became general. General White's central column was screened by a ridge near the railway, and the big gun on Signal Hill directed its fire partly against the town and partly against the cavalry which could be seen by them in rear of the column. As only a few of the Volunteer Horse had been ordered to accompany the attacking force, Chris and his companions took up their position on an eminence that afforded a general view of the battle, and here a large number of the townspeople also gathered. The general plan of operations was that the two movable columns should form a rough arc of a circle and, driving in both flanks of the Boers, sweep the whole force before them.

"They have a great many guns," Peters said, as the rattle of the machine-guns and the thud of quick-firing one-pounders joined the continuous fire of several Boer batteries and the deeper roar of their big gun, "and they seem to be in greater force than was supposed, for I can make out large reinforcements coming up to them from behind."

Our artillery were first placed about four thousand yards from the Boer position, but as this was on higher ground than that occupied by our guns our fire did not appear to be effective. They were therefore moved forward some distance, supported by two battalions of the Rifles and the Dublin Fusiliers. The infantry force with them pushed forward rapidly and gained a crest from which they threatened to take the Boer position on Signal Hill in rear; but the Boers, very strongly reinforced, moved to meet them, and heavy fighting took place, until the enemy's force became so strong that they not only checked the farther advance of the brigade, but threatened it on both flanks. Two batteries went to their assistance, but even with this aid they could not continue their advance, pressed as they were by greatly superior numbers and harassed by the fire of the Boer field-batteries on the hill.

At other points our advance was opposed as hotly. Nowhere were our infantry gaining ground. The enemy had not wasted their time, but had thrown up entrenchments on the steep hills they occupied, and from these shelters maintained a terrible fire, while their numerous machine-guns swept the ground with a hail of bullets and shells. On such ground the cavalry were useless, and the range of the Boer guns was much greater than that of our own.

"It seems to me," Chris said, "that instead of gaining

ground we are losing it. We can't see at all what is going on, but certainly the firing seems nearer than it was."

All had thought the same, though none had cared to suggest such a thing.

"Hurrah! there is a train coming in," Field said. "I heard they were expecting a party of sailors with naval guns. They would be useful just at the present moment. Let us go down and see, we can make out nothing from here."

Glad to be doing something, they went down the hill. As they reached the station they saw a large detachment of sailors at work detraining some twelve-pounders and two large quick-firing guns. Teams of oxen were brought up, the sailors harnessed themselves to ropes, and with tremendous exertions one of the guns was taken up to an eminence, and at eleven it opened fire. It was but just in time. In steady order the columns were retiring with their faces towards the Boers, answering shot for shot, carrying off their wounded as they dropped, in spite of the terrible rifle fire and the roar of the Boers' batteries; but as soon as the first naval gun opened fire, amid the cheers of the townspeople, the situation was changed. The first two shells burst close to the Boer big gun, the third in the midst of the artillerymen, and it was some time before its fire was resumed. In the meantime the sailors had turned their attention to other Boer batteries which the field-artillery had scarcely been able to reach, and one by one these were withdrawn over the crest.

At one o'clock Colonel Hamilton's brigade, which had hitherto been lying behind the crest they first occupied, in readiness to repel any counter-attack the Boers might make, now moved out and took up their position to cover the retire-

ment of Hunter's column and Howard's brigade, and although the Boers pressed hotly upon them they held their ground steadily until their comrades had all reached their camp, and then marched in unhindered by the enemy, whose big cannon had now been finally silenced by the naval gun and their batteries for the most part obliged to retire.

After seeing the naval gun open fire Chris had gone down to speak to Captain Brookfield, when he met two soldiers of a mountain-battery carrying an injured comrade. They took him into the hospital and then came out. Their shoulder-straps showed them to belong to the mountain-battery that had gone out with the Royal Irish Fusiliers and the Gloucesters, of whom nothing had been heard, though occasionally, in momentary intervals of fire, the sound of distant musketry could be made out in the direction of Nicholson's Nek.

"How are your party getting on?" he asked.

"We don't know anything about them, sir," one of the men said, "except that they have been heavily engaged since daylight. I am afraid that they are in a tight place."

"How is it you know nothing about them?"

"It has been a bad job altogether," the man said. "We were marching up a steep valley with only room for us to lead two mules abreast; we were in the rear of the column. Suddenly a boulder came rolling down the hill and some shots were fired. In a moment the mules stampeded. One or two began it, kicking and plunging and squealing like wild beasts, then the others all set to. There was no holding them; it was almost pitch-dark, and before one could say 'knife' they were tearing down the road we had come up. There was no time to stop, and those who were lucky jumped

out of their way, those who were not were knocked down and trampled on. As soon as they had gone those of us who were not hurt set off after them and looked for them everywhere, but only two or three were caught. Where the rest went I don't know, but I hope that they got into the enemy's line of fire and were all shot. At last we gave it up as a bad job, and went back to bring in the fellows who were hurt. I think most of them are in now. We have been a long time, for Thompson's leg was broken and one of his arms, and, I expect, most of his ribs, and it hurt him so to be moved that we have had to stop every two yards."

"It is a bad business indeed," Chris said; "and of course all your guns are lost?"

"Every one of them, and what is worse, all the reserve small-arm ammunition is lost too. The mules carrying them were with ours, and as the fighting up there has been going on ever since, I am afraid the infantry must have pretty well used up their last cartridges."

It was not until the next day that the extent of the calamity was known, when a Boer came down with a white flag asking that doctors might be sent up. The little column, instead of, as had been hoped, surprising the Boers, had itself been ambushed, being suddenly attacked by two strong parties of the enemy. They at once seized a little eminence, threw up a breastwork of stone, and defended themselves successfully until the ammunition was entirely exhausted, and a hundred and fifty had been killed or wounded. The Boers had, by taking advantage of every bit of cover, crept up close to them, and a murderous fire was poured in. The two regiments asked Colonel Carleton, who commanded them, to allow them to

charge with their bayonets and cut their way through. He consented to allow the desperate attempt to be made, and the men were in the act of fixing bayonets when someone raised a white flag, and the Boers, standing up, advanced to receive the surrender.

After this the laws of war permitted no further defence, and the men, half-mad with fury at the situation in which they were placed, threw down their rifles and were made prisoners. This was at two o'clock in the afternoon, after the rest of the force had returned to Ladysmith; and thus some nine hundred men fell into the hands of the Boers. Apart from this the loss was comparatively small considering the heat of the engagement. The day's work had been altogether unsatisfactory; no advantage whatever had been gained beyond the discovery of the Boers' position and their unexpected strength and fighting powers, and it was evident that the force at Ladysmith was unable to drive off the enemy unaided, and must undergo a siege until the arrival of a relieving army. There were provisions calculated to last for two months, and no one doubted that long before that time General Buller would arrive to their rescue. So confident had the military authorities been, that not only had no defensive works been thrown up, but they had omitted to send the women and children, and the men unfitted to give active assistance, to the rear.

On the following morning the scouts held a council of war.

"Now," Chris said, "we have to decide the all-important question. It is quite certain that the town is going to be besieged, and I should say that the siege will last for some time, as nothing can be done to relieve them until a lot of

troops arrive from home. We have shown at Dundee and Elandslaagte that our fellows can drive the Boers from their kopjes, but a force arriving to relieve Ladysmith would have to fight its way through a tremendously mountainous district, and to capture at least eight or ten such positions. At Dundee and Elandslaagte the Boers had only a few guns, and the big one from Pretoria had not arrived, nor had they had time to fortify themselves. It is certain, therefore, that it will require a very big force to fight its way in here, especially as the Tugela has to be crossed, and the Boers will, of course, destroy the bridges.

"It may be a couple of months before the place is relieved. Of course the question is, Shall we stay here or go? I don't think we should be of much use here; indeed, I don't see that cavalry would be any good at all, whereas if a portion of the Boers push south we may be very useful in our own line of scouting. Still, this is a question for you to decide. You chose to make me your commander when at work, but we should all have an equal voice in a matter of this sort."

There was little discussion; all were of their leader's opinion that it was best for them to leave. The prospect of a long siege in which they could take but little active part was not a pleasant one, and it was decided at once that they should leave.

"Very well," Chris said. "Then I will go in to Captain Brookfield and ask his permission to go. Now that we are in camp with him he must be consulted."

They had since Elandslaagte taken their places as a part of the Maritzburg Scouts, and had been drilled for some hours each day. They were already favourites among the corps,

who were proud of the work they had done, and being a pleasant set of lads their uncouth appearance, which had at first been viewed with much disfavour by many of their comrades, had been forgiven. Chris went to the commander's tent and laid the matter and their decision before him.

"I think that it is just as well that you should go, Chris," the officer said; "and indeed I was on the point of telling you that we are all leaving. For myself, I cannot understand why the cavalry should be kept here, and indeed I know that it is their opinion also, and that they have asked the general to let them leave. However, he has decided to keep them. I am sure it is a mistake. Before the siege is over, forage is sure to run short, and half the cavalry will be dismounted before the end comes. However, I have seen him and pointed out that as scouts we should be useless here. He has given me leave to go, but has requested me to join the first troops that come up the line. When we are once away I shall give you leave to act altogether independently of us, which will, I am sure, suit you better than being kept for weeks perhaps at Colenso or Estcourt. Another thing I will do. General Yule was speaking to me only yesterday of the manner in which your party defeated and cut up more than double your number, and how you and three of your party went into the Boer camp at Talana and ascertained their strength for General Symons. I expect that General Buller will come on here, as it is certainly the most serious point at present. I will ask Yule to give you a letter of introduction to him, it will be useful; and I have no doubt that he will give you a free hand, as I have done. I should not call upon General Buller in that rig-out, if I were you. I have heard he is somewhat of a martinet at the

War Office, and we know that they have a very poor opinion of volunteers there."

Chris smiled. "Volunteers have done good service at the Cape before now, sir, and have shown over and over again that a man can fight just as well in plain clothes as if he were buttoned up to the chin in uniform; and as the Boers are themselves nothing but volunteers, I should think that before this war is over, the War Office will see its mistake."

"I should think so indeed, Chris, but at present they have certainly not woke up to the fact. I see by the telegrams that the London Scottish and the London Irish have both volunteered almost to a man for service here, and that they have not even had a civil reply to their application. I tell you, lad, this war is going to be a big thing, and before it is over we may have both militia and volunteers out here, and perhaps troops from the colonies. I heard that some of the Australian colonies have already offered to send bodies of mounted men, and that our government are ordering out a larger number of men than was at first intended. I hear this morning that at Kimberley and Mafeking fighting has begun. On the 24th Kimberley made a successful sortie, and on the 25th a general attack on Mafeking was repulsed. The fact that both these places are beleaguered, and that we have again been obliged to fall back here, and are likely to be cut off altogether, has evidently stirred them up, and they begin to understand that it is going to be a much bigger affair than they expected.

"I wrote to your mother yesterday at Durban, and told her that I intended to leave while it is still possible. Of course you have written; but I told her of the flattering way in which General Yule had spoken of the doings of you and your

party, and said that I hoped she would not be anxious, for it was quite evident that you were able to take good care of yourselves. My letter was in answer to one she wrote to me from Durban, begging me to keep you from undertaking what she called 'mad-brained business', and expressing some regret that you and the others had been allowed to form a separate corps, instead of being under the command of an experienced officer like myself. I told her that I thought that you would have less chance of coming to harm in scouting work than if you had to work in a regular way as the general ordered. If this sort of fighting—I mean, of attacking in front every position the Boers choose to take—goes on, our numbers will very speedily dwindle away.

"The fact is, as far as we colonials can see, the regulars do not as yet understand fighting the Boers. Nothing could be more splendid than the behaviour of the troops both at Dundee and Elandslaagte, but in our humble opinion neither fight was necessary; and if Talana was to be attacked, it should have been done by marching the troops round the hill and taking it in rear. In that case the Boers would have bolted without firing a shot. That it could have been done is shown by the fact that the cavalry did it, and encountered no difficulty on the way. Again, at Elandslaagte the object of keeping the road open would have been equally well attained if, after driving them out of the station, we had taken up a strong position there and waited for them to attack us. Therefore, Chris, I think that fighting in our way—that is to say, in Boer fashion—and trusting to skill as much as to shooting, you will be running a good deal less risk than you would in fighting under British generals in

British fashion. We shall go off quietly this evening. We must keep a bright look-out on the way, for the trains have been fired upon, and at any moment the Boers may pull up the rails and block the roads altogether."

Two hours later all was ready for a start, and just before sunset the corps rode out of Ladysmith. They kept a sharp look-out as they went, but saw no signs of the enemy, and, crossing the Tugela by the bridge near Colenso, halted there for the night. Here Captain Brookfield reported his arrival to the officer in command of the troops, and on the following day Chris and his friends rode on to Estcourt. They had seen some parties of mounted men in the far distance, but none had come near them, and as the military authorities were well aware of the Boers being in the vicinity, there was nothing to be gained by scouting. But it was now decided that they were in advance of the point that any large number of the enemy were likely to reach, and might therefore strike across the country and resume what they considered their regular work. They added to their stores several articles whose want they had felt, had slits made in the waterproof sheets, and covers sewn on to close the holes when they were used for tents, and had some triangular pieces of the same material made to buckle on so as to close the rear of the tents, which had before been open to the wind and rain. They had employed much of their spare time in training their horses and in teaching them to lie down when ordered, and thus share the shelter taken up by their masters, behind rocks or a wall.

The officer commanding the small force at Estcourt had at first viewed them with some suspicion, but Colonel Yule had

purposely left open the letter with which he had furnished Chris, so that it could be shown to any officers commanding posts or detached forces, and its production now caused his cold reception to be converted into a warm welcome. Riding across country they met more than one farmer trekking with his cattle and belongings towards the ferry across the Mooi river. These reported that the Boers had overrun the whole of the country north of the Tugela, and that some parties had already crossed at the ferry on the road between Helpmakaar and Greytown. Fugitives had come in from the villages on the other side, and complained that the Boers were looting everywhere, and had driven off thousands of cattle and numbers of horses, and had everywhere wantonly destroyed the furniture and everything they could not carry off, in the farmhouses they visited.

A vigilant look-out was kept as the scouts advanced. On the second day after starting they encamped on a slight elevation near Mount Umhlumba, and early next morning they saw a party of some twenty Boers riding in a direction that would bring them within rifle-shot of their camp. All were at once on the alert.

"We will not go out and attack them," Chris said to the lads who were running towards their horses. "That would mean that though we might kill all of them, half of us would probably be shot. We will ambush them. Get the picket ropes loose and the bridles on ready for mounting, and then leave the horses in charge of the natives where we camped. They will be out of sight there. When you have done that take your places quietly among the rocks. Do you, Capper and Carmichael, put yourselves twenty or thirty yards apart;

you are our best shots. When the Boers get within a thousand yards, which is as near as they will do if they keep the line they are going, open fire upon them and keep it up steadily, but not too fast. When they see that only two men are firing they will think that you are a couple of farmers whose place they have plundered, and who are determined to have their revenge. You are safe to hit some of them, and the others will decide upon wiping you out, and will probably leave their horses and crawl up in their usual style. When they get close it will be our turn. I don't think many of them are likely to get away."

His orders were carried out, and five minutes later the two rifles flashed out one after another. The Boers were riding in a clump. One was seen to fall, and the horse of another gave a violent plunge.

"Very good!" exclaimed Chris, who, like the rest, was lying down behind a rock. "Don't fire too fast. Wait half a minute, and then each take another turn, one a little time after the other."

The man who had fallen was instantly picked up by one of his comrades, and all rode off at full gallop, but before they could get beyond range of the Mausers each of the lads had fired two more shots. No more of the Boers dropped, but the watchers, who had their glasses directed upon them, thought by their movements that two had been hit. The Boers, when the firing ceased, stopped, and for some little time remained clustered together. Then they took a long sweep round to a point where the ground was broken, and a shallow donga ran up in a direction that would bring them within a hundred yards of the position occupied by their hidden

assailants. There they were seen to dismount, and, after some talk, leaving all the horses in the charge of one man, probably one of the wounded, they entered the donga. Its course was irregular, and once or twice the two lads were able to get a shot at them. The Boers did not return the fire, but hurried past the exposed points. As they approached, a head was occasionally raised above the bank to view the position, and then disappeared again. The ground between the camp and the nearest point of the donga was thickly strewn with boulders, with bushes growing between them. The lads had all shifted their position to this side.

"Don't open fire till I give the order," Chris said quietly. "We have got them now."

Except for a slight movement of the bushes, it would not have been known that the Boers had left the donga. Once or twice Capper and Carmichael caught a momentary glimpse of one of them, but held their fire, as Chris had said,

"Let them come within twenty yards, then both fire at once, whether you catch a glimpse of them or not. Thinking that your rifles are discharged, they will all jump up and make a rush. Then it will be our turn."

Presently a man's head was seen peering round a rock at about the right distance. Both the rifles cracked at once, and a Boer fell prone on the ground beyond his shelter. At the same moment there was a shout, and his comrades all sprang to their feet and rushed forward. A volley from the whole of the scouts flashed out. Twelve of the Boers fell, the others leapt back behind their shelters, and in turn opened fire.

"Keep in shelter!" Chris shouted. "They know now that we are two to their one, and will soon be making off."

M 683

"BOTH RIFLES CRACKED AT ONCE"

The combatants were so close to each other that neither dared expose shoulder or head to take aim, and after the first shots fired at the Boers all remained quiet. Chris waited for three or four minutes, and then told four of the lads who were in the best shelter to crawl back, mount their horses, and ride out down the other side of the slope, and, after making a slight circuit, to gallop straight at the Boers' horses.

"The fellows may be some distance away already," he said, "as they may have slipped off directly they discharged their rifles. In any case there is no time to be lost in getting hold of their ponies, or at any rate in driving them off."

As two or three minutes again passed without a shot being fired by the Boers, Chris was in the act of calling off half the troop to watch the donga and fire at the Boers if they saw them running past the exposed points, when at this moment he heard the horses returning, and directly afterwards one of the lads he had sent off ran up to him.

"There are a whole lot of them coming round the other side," he said, "sixty or seventy of them at least. Some distance behind I can see a lot of cattle and waggons. I suppose they were making for home when they heard the firing."

Just at this moment two or three shots rang out, telling that the surviving Boers were seen running down the donga.

"Never mind them," Chris shouted; "we are going to be attacked by a big party. Put down your rifles all of you, and pile the stones on the crest, so as to make a shelter, as quickly as you can. We shall have a few minutes. Those who are coming up can't know yet what the firing means." He ran up to the top. "They are not more than six or seven hundred yards away," he said, "and it would be better

to fight it out here than to take to our horses. Some of us would certainly not get off without a bullet. You need not mind showing yourselves when they come up. They won't be able to make out what we are."

The Boers, indeed, reined in their ponies when they saw Chris appear on the brow of the eminence, and as a preliminary some of them rode off in both directions and endeavoured to ascertain the position. Those on the right soon caught sight of the clump of horses.

"They will soon know all about it," Chris said, as two of them galloped off. "We may as well teach them to keep their distance. Take your places behind rocks, and then open a sharp fire with your magazines. They cannot know how many of us there are here. Now, are you all ready? Yes? Well, then, set to work!"

In a moment an almost incessant rattle of musketry broke out upon the astounded Boers, who, turning their horses, scattered at full gallop to escape the hail of bullets; but more than a dozen had fallen before they were beyond the range of the Mausers and were fully two thousand yards away.

"I don't think we need stop," Chris said. "Fill up your magazines again, and then make for the horses."

Directly the first party of Boers had been seen, Jack and Japhet had set to work taking down and rolling up the tents and loading up the spare horses.

"Jump up," Chris said to them, "we are off. Mind you keep well with us. Now," he went on, as they rode off in a body, "we will do a little cattle raiding on our own account. Make for them, lads!"

With a shout they rode off at full gallop towards the great

herd of cattle. As they approached, the Kaffirs who were driving them fled. Separating as they rode, waving their hats and shouting at the top of their voices, the lads dashed at the herd, who at once turned and went off at a rate that would have astonished animals accustomed only to small pastures and other enclosures.

"Don't press them too much," Chris had ordered before the band separated, "or they will break down. Listen for my whistle; when you hear it, Field, Willesden, Harris, and Bryan will follow up the herd with the Kaffirs and keep them moving, the rest will dismount, make their horses lie down, and open fire. That narrow valley we passed through yesterday afternoon will do to make a stand. It is about five miles away, head the cattle for it. The Boers won't be far behind us when we get there."

The enemy indeed had not noticed them leave the little kopje, as they were hidden by a slight fall in the ground where they descended, and it was not until they observed a commotion among the cattle that they perceived what had happened. Then, furious not only at the loss they had suffered, but at seeing their booty driven away, they mounted and pursued in hot haste. But the party had obtained a start of fully a mile, and the valley was reached by the fugitives while the Boers were still half that distance in their rear. Chris rode along until he came to a narrow and defensible point; the horses were taken a hundred yards on and made to lie down, and he and his sixteen companions then ran back and took up their positions among the rocks on each side of the track and the slopes above it.

CHAPTER VIII

A DESPERATE PROJECT

SCARCELY had the band taken cover in the gorge than the Boers appeared some five hundred yards away.

"Open fire at once!" Chris shouted, "the farther they have to come under fire the less they will like it."

The rifles at once spoke out. The lads had all used the boulders behind which they crouched as rests for their rifles, and, confident of their shooting and their position, their aim was deadly. Five or six of the leading Boers fell, and several horses; the rest came to an abrupt pause, galloped back some little distance and then dismounted, and, leaving their horses in shelter, disappeared from sight. In a short time a dropping fire was opened from both sides of the valley.

"Don't fire unless you see a man," Chris ordered, "there are gaps on the hillside that they can't pass without giving you a chance. Fire in rotation, it is no use wasting a dozen bullets on one man; if the first misses, let the next shoot instantly, and so on. When they learn that it is death to leave shelter, they will soon get sick of it. Keep yourselves well under cover."

The rifle duel continued for an hour. As Chris had said would be the case, after seven or eight had fallen, as they were trying to make rushes across pieces of ground where boulders afforded no cover, the rest became very cautious, and at last only an occasional shot was heard.

"We will fall back now," Chris said, "for aught we know a party of them may be working round somewhere to take us in rear. We know that they have not got their horses with

them, for we can see the spot where they hid them. Still, we do not want to be caught between two fires. Let four on each flank crawl back; keep well among the rocks, and don't let them catch sight of you. We will fire occasionally to let them know that we are still here. When you have got the horses up and everything is ready, whistle, and we will come back to you. It will be a long time before they venture to crawl up and discover that we have gone, an hour most likely, and by that time the cattle will be a dozen miles on their way to Estcourt, and the Boers are not likely to follow them."

Ten minutes later all were in their saddles. They had left the horses at a spot where there was a sharp elbow in the gorge, and their retreat could not be seen from the valley below. They cantered along in high glee; not one had received a scratch, while some twelve of the first party of Boers had fallen, and fully fifteen of the second, and it was certain that at least as many more must have been wounded.

"I expect they really gave up all idea of carrying our position long ago," Chris said, "and have only been keeping up their fire to prevent our turning the tables upon them. They must have seen that we are better mounted than they are, and have been afraid that we should in turn take the offensive. I should not be surprised if they stay where they are all day, and don't venture to mount and ride off till it gets dark."

"You are something like a leader," Peters said enthusiastically. "We knew that you were a good fellow, and would make the best leader among us, but no one could think that our choice would turn out so well as it has done. This is the second fight we have had with the Boers, and we have

thrashed them well each time, although the first time they were twice as strong, and in the second something like four times, and we have not lost one of our number. I am sure if we had been caught where we were without you with us, at least half of us would have been killed, and we should have been lucky to get away with only that."

Riding without pressing their horses, it was two hours before they overtook the party with the cattle. These had now broken into a walk.

"We kept them at it till half an hour ago," Willesden said apologetically, when they came up, "but the Kaffirs said that unless we gave them a rest half of them would drop, so we let them go easy till you came up."

"Quite right!" Chris said. "We have given the Boers such a thrashing that there is no fear of their continuing the pursuit. Unless we meet some more of these thieves, we can go on as quietly as we like. I have some sort of respect for men like those we met at Dundee and Elandslaagte, who fight manfully and stoutly; but for these raiding scoundrels who only come out to rob and plunder, and do wanton damage to quiet people, one feels only disgust, and shoots them without the least compunction."

There was a general chorus of agreement.

"Did they get near you, Chris?"

"Not within about four hundred yards. They got it so hot at first that they dismounted and took to the rocks; they pushed on for a bit, and if the whole hillside had been covered with boulders we might have had some sharp fighting, but there were some open spaces to be crossed, and after getting over two or three of them they found it safer to

lie as close as rabbits. For aught we know they are there still."

They travelled quietly till sunset, and then halted in an open valley where there was water and good grass. Half the company kept watch by turns, being posted with their horses some half a mile out in the country, taking the animals with them not only because they could fall back more quickly, but because they knew the horses would hear any approaching sound long before their masters were able to do so, and would evince their uneasiness unmistakably. There was, however, no alarm, and two days later, travelling by easy stages, they arrived at Estcourt, where their arrival with so large a number of cattle created quite a sensation. They at once put up a notice at the post-office, that all persons who had been raided by the Boers could come and inspect the herd and take all animals bearing their brand. It soon appeared that the cattle were the property of four farmers living within a short distance of each other. They had arrived in Estcourt with their families two days previously, weary and broken down with fatigue, hunger, and the loss and ruin of their property. Their gratitude was deep indeed at this wholly unexpected recovery of a large portion of their herds, and they started the next morning, mounted on some ponies they had picked up for a trifle, to drive them down the country.

Chris saw the officer in command as soon as they arrived in the town, and gave him an outline of their adventure, upon which he was warmly congratulated. "Shall I send in a written report to you, sir?" Chris asked.

"No, you are not under my orders; and I should say that you had better write and post it to the officer com-

manding the force at Maritzburg. I do not know who it may be."

"Is the road closed to Ladysmith?" Chris asked.

"Yes, two days since. General French, who is ordered to Port Elizabeth to take command of the cavalry brigade that is forming to drive back the Boers who have crossed the Orange River, came down in the last train that got out. It was hotly fired upon by the Boers, but luckily they had not taken up the rails, and the train got through safely. We have had no news since, for even the wire to Colenso has been cut, and for anything we know the place may be in possession of the Boers. We have a little fort here, and have been throwing up entrenchments, but if they come in any force there is not much hope of our getting off. We have an armoured train, which yesterday ran to within a mile or so of Colenso without being interfered with, though several parties of the enemy could be seen in the distance. I have great hopes that we shall get half a battalion up from Maritzburg to-morrow; if so, by loopholing the houses and throwing up some breastworks, we ought to be able to keep the Boers out of the place, unless they come in force. At any rate, I should advise you to scout next time beyond the Mooi River and to make Maritzburg your head-quarters. So far as we know, the Boers have not yet gone beyond that river, and any news of their doing so would certainly be of value. You have done marvellously well in getting away from that party you met, but you might not be so lucky next time, for as they push on they are sure in a short time to be strong all over the country between the Tugela and the Mooi."

This, after some consultation, was agreed to by the troop.

There was no reason for haste, and they rode by easy stages down to Maritzburg, stopping at Weston and Hawick. Many of their friends had gone down to Durban, but some still remained, and from these they received a hearty welcome. All found letters awaiting them, for it had been arranged that as it would be impossible to give any address, these should be sent to Maritzburg. Their friends were scarcely ready to credit their stories, but, on being shown General Yule's letter, saw that at least the accounts of their early doings were strictly correct.

Troops were coming up fast from Durban, and there was already a strong brigade there. Chris called upon the brigadier and presented General Yule's letter, and his own report of the fight with the Boers subsequently.

"This shows what can be done by young fellows who are good shots and good riders, and who, I may say, Mr. King, have been admirably commanded. What are your wishes now? There are two or three troops of volunteer horse here; would you wish to be attached to one of them? Of course, if you do so there will be no difficulty about it; but really, I think that you would be more useful in carrying on your work in your own way."

It had been known for a long time past that a large proportion of the cannon, rifles, and ammunition of the Boers had been landed at the Portuguese port of Lorenzo Marques, and taken up by rail from there to Komati-poort—a station on the frontier, where there was a bridge across the Komati river—and thence by rail to Pretoria. Chris heard that it was generally known that the Portuguese officials, who had long been influenced by Boer money extracted from the Uitlanders,

were still winking at the practice, although it was a breach of neutrality. So much indignation was expressed on the subject at Maritzburg that Chris, one day when the party assembled at the spot where their horses were tethered, said:

"I want to have a serious talk with you all. You have all heard that immense quantities of arms and dynamite are passing through Lorenzo Marques. Now, at present we don't see much for us to do here. My idea is, that if we could manage to blow up the bridge across the river that divides Portuguese territory from the Transvaal, we should do an infinitely greater service than by killing any number of plundering Boers."

His troop looked at each other in surprise.

"You are not really in earnest, Chris?" Peters said; "it would be a tremendous business."

"It would be a big business, no doubt, but I was never more earnest in my life than in proposing it. Now that we know how strong the Boers are round Ladysmith, and what terribly hard work it will be for an army to fight its way through all those hills, we can see that the first calculations as to the time when it can be relieved are a good deal short of the mark. There must be at least twenty thousand men collected here to do it, and I think it is more likely to be the end of January than the end of December before the Boers are driven off. We have in the one case seven weeks and in the other twelve before the place is relieved, and we begin to turn the tables on the Boers; and according to the way we carry my idea out it depends whether we are back here by the end of the year or by the end of January—that is, I acknowledge, if we get back at all.

"I have been thinking it over. There are two ways of doing it. We can go on board a ship touching at Durban and going on to Lorenzo Marques. I don't say that we could not all do it, but it would be better to choose only four; a larger number would excite more observation. Those who go will of course take dynamite with them. We can buy that at Durban. At Lorenzo Marques we should assume the character of four young Irish fellows. We know there are lots of them already up there, and Germans too, fighting in the Boer ranks, and I am glad to know that they got peppered at Elandslaagte, although that is not to the point. We should go as four Irish lads who have come across from America to fight for the Boers. We have heard plenty of Irish in the mines and at Johannesburg, so shall be able to put enough brogue in our talk to pass. I know from what I have heard that a tip to the Portuguese officials would be quite sufficient for them to pass anything without examination; but even if they did open our cases and find dynamite in them, we could account for it by saying that we had been told before starting that it would be the handiest thing to take with us, and would be of more assistance to the Boers than anything we could bring them.

"No doubt some of the passengers would know that we got on board at Durban, but if any questions were asked we could account for that by saying that the ship we came over in was going on to Australia, and therefore we had been obliged to land and take another on to Lorenzo Marques. Once landed, we should, of course, take a train for Komati-poort, and slip off it after dark at some station a few miles from there. Then, you know, we could first reconnoitre the bridge, and when we had settled on the best place for the dynamite, we could put

it there the next night. I know a good deal about the use of dynamite. It is not like gunpowder, that you have to put in a hole and fasten up tightly; you only have to lay it upon an iron girder or arch, and light your fuse and leave it to do its work."

The boys listened with increasing surprise to his proposal.

"And what is your other plan?" Peters asked after a long pause.

"The other plan is that we should all take a passage in some small craft, which we could hire, to St. Lucia Bay, and then go up through Zululand and Swaziland, which extends to within a short distance of Komati-poort. Both tribes are friendly enough with us, and hate the Boers like poison. Of course in that case we shall take the dynamite with us, and then must be guided by circumstances as to our course and what we should do when we got to the bridge."

There was again a long silence; then Brown said: "If anyone but you had proposed it, Chris, I should have scoffed at it as impossible, but for myself I have come to have such confidence in you that I believe you would manage it. There can be no doubt that it would be a grand thing if we could do it. I have heard my father say that the river is a terribly bad one, and that sometimes it is altogether impassable for weeks at a time. Except by the bridge, even in the best times, I should think, from what he said, it would be quite impossible for them to take heavy things like cannon across. Anyhow, I am ready to go with you."

"Thank you, Brown," Chris said. "I should certainly not ask anyone to go. Those who are willing to do so must volunteer. Of course we only combined for the purpose of

acting as scouts, and no one ever contemplated doing more. So far, we have, as all allow, carried out that object well; and I have no doubt that those who do not care to join in what is a sort of forlorn hope, will continue to do well after we have started on it, and of course I shall, if I get back, rejoin them. My scheme would, no doubt, be considered a very wild one, but I can see no reason why, with good luck, it should not succeed. Indeed, I believe that it will succeed, if, when we arrive there, we do not find that the Boers are guarding the bridge. Of course, if they do so there is but little hope of carrying the matter out. They will know the importance of the bridge to them, and how greatly its destruction would be desired by the British Government, and may think it possible that such an attempt as I propose would be made, and take precautions to prevent its success.

"I do not mean to throw away my life. If, when I get there, I find that it is next to impossible to carry the matter out, I shall give it up; but even then the information I should get about matters up there, both as to the Boers and the Swazis, would be of use. We know that Boer agents have been doing their utmost to get the Basutos to join them, and it is likely that they may be trying to induce the Zulus and Swazis to do the same; and even if we fail in the principal object, I should say that the time would not be wasted. When I am up there, I can, of course, get news as to how the war is going on, and if I find that our forces are pushing up into the Transvaal, I shall make straight across the country and join them. I have been thinking over the matter a good deal since we came here, and made up my mind that anyhow I shall try to carry it out, so I now resign the leadership, and

also for the present my membership. Now, I don't want to influence you in any way. It has all come suddenly upon you. You had better talk it over together. All I ask you is that you will not say a word about it to anyone, not even to your relations.

"Not only because, as I know would be the case, they would be afraid of having anything to do with what they would consider an absolutely mad scheme, but because a chance word might prove fatal to success. As everyone knows, there are a great number of Dutch in the colony, who, although they may not be openly hostile, are in favour of the Boers, and will no doubt keep them acquainted with every movement of troops here, and can have no difficulty in communicating with them by native runners. Were one of our friends even to mention it casually that we had gone north, suspicions might be aroused. Therefore I beg that no one will breathe a word about the matter, but that you will decide for yourselves without consulting anyone. I shall leave you now, and we will meet here at the same time to-morrow. You will have had time to think it over then. I wish to say before I go, that I don't consider that the success of my plan depends upon my having the whole twenty of you with me. I repeat, that four would be quite sufficient.

"There are advantages as well as disadvantages in having only that number. We should travel without exciting so much notice; we should have less difficulty about food; we could conceal ourselves more easily in case we were pursued. On the other hand, with a stronger party we could repulse an attack if chased by the Boers. So you see I really do not want more than three of you to join. I think four is the best

number, and should be glad if only two besides Brown wished to go with me; but at the same time, if more desire it, of course, as we are all comrades, they would have a right to go."

So saying he turned away, leaving the others to talk the matter over. They went through their usual drill that afternoon without any allusion being made to the subject. When they met the next day Chris said cheerfully, "Well, what have you decided? First, Brown, do you stick to what you said yesterday, or do you think better of it?"

"Certainly I stick to it," Brown said. "When I say a thing I mean it."

"And how about the others?"

"I have made up my mind to go with you, Chris," Peters said, "and so has Willesden. Field and Capper and Sankey would all go with you if you wanted to take more than four, and all would go if you wanted the troop; but if you would rather only have three of us, it is settled that Brown, Willesden, and I go."

"Very well," Chris said, "that just suits me. I am glad that you would all go if you were wanted; but really I think that four would be the best number, so we will consider that as settled. And now there is one other thing I want to ask you about. You see, we have no right to take any money out of the common fund, but we shall have some heavy expenses. In the first place we shall want, I should say, a couple of hundred pounds of dynamite; then we shall have to take some natives with us, a couple of Zulus and two or three Swazis. There will be no difficulty in getting them, as so many have been thrown out of employment owing to the farmers losing their herds. We may find it useful to make presents to

chiefs as we go along, and, of course, we shall have to take a certain amount of provisions for the party. Have you any objection to our each taking half our share out of the bank? Nothing has been drawn at present, and with a couple of hundred pounds between us we shall have enough and to spare for however long we may be away."

There was a chorus of agreement.

"We are all awfully sorry that you are going, Chris," Field said. "It won't be the same without you at all. We have agreed to ask you to nominate a leader during your absence."

"I would much rather not do that," Chris said. "Everyone has done equally well, and it is a question that you should settle among yourselves."

"We are all against that," Field said positively. "We have talked it over, and agree that we shall never be able to fix on one. Suppose our votes were divided between four and five I don't think we should feel more comfortable afterwards. We would rather put all the names in a hat and draw one out, just leaving it to chance."

"I almost think that it would be better," Chris said, "to do as you propose. Agree first that, as we have done up till now, all important matters shall be discussed and decided by vote, then draw all the names from a hat and let each be leader for a week in the order in which they come out, with the proviso that if, as time goes on, you find that you can have more confidence in one than another, you can by a majority of three to one elect him as permanent leader."

"That would be a very good plan," Carmichael said; "but, you see, the difficulty is that, supposing we were going to attack the Boers or the Boers attack us, the plan the leader

fixed on might not seem to us at all the best. In the two fights we have had there was not that difficulty, for everyone felt that the plan you adopted was the best, and indeed much better than any of us would have been likely to think of. I don't say that that would occur, but it might. It is not everyone who could fix upon the best thing to be done all at once as you did."

Chris thought for a minute. "I would suggest," he said, "that in such a case as you mention the leader should tell the next two on the list what he proposed. If one of the two agreed with him it would be a majority, and there would be nothing more to be said on the matter. If both disagreed with him there must be a general vote. I should hope such a thing would never occur, because the loss of five minutes would sometimes be disastrous, though in some cases it might not make any difference. Still, that is the best plan I can think of. There is no occasion for you to decide that straight off. At any rate, if you should find that any arrangement you make does not act perfectly well, I should advise you to join Captain Brookfield's troop and act with him."

The general opinion was strongly in favour of Chris's suggestion. It was agreed that at any rate the first leader should be chosen by chance. Carmichael's name came first out of the hat.

"I shall not have much responsibility," he said, "as we have settled to remain here until the advance begins. Now, Chris, about the spare horses?"

"I should like to take one of them. We may have to gallop for it, and it is of no use our being well mounted if we are hampered with a pony that cannot keep up with us. We

have only to lighten its load by getting rid of most of its burden, and then we should be free to go our own pace.

"I should like to take one of our Kaffirs. They have both turned out very well, and have a good idea of cooking, and are accustomed to our ways. I don't care which I have, but I should certainly like to have one of them. He would stick to the spare horse, while the other natives would be all right if they scattered and shifted for themselves."

"Would you not like two spare horses, Chris?"

"No, thank you, one would be enough. He would carry our stores, and I should get two native ponies to take the dynamite along. We shall not be travelling at any extraordinary rate of speed, and if they broke down we could always replace them. Certainly there would be no danger if we go through Zululand, and, I should think, not until we get north of the Swazis' country; for though I know there are Boers settled among them, a good many would of course have joined their army, and it would be easy to avoid the others. The danger will only lie in the last part of the journey."

"Then you have settled to go by land?"

"Yes, I have decided to go all the way on horseback. We might find difficulties with the Portuguese at Lorenzo Marques, and if we manage to blow up the bridge, should have no horses, and should have a very bad time indeed in getting back. If I can get dynamite here I shall go all the way by land, and it would be safer. No doubt the Boers have spies at Durban, and we might have difficulty in hiring a craft to take us to St. Lucia, and our starting with horses and five or six natives would be safe to attract the attention of someone looking out for news to send to the Boers. I think the best

plan will be to keep a little to the east of the road to Greytown, where no doubt there are some Dutch, and strike the road that runs from there to Eshowe. A little west of Krantzkop there must be either a drift or a bridge or a ferry where it crosses the Tugela. I shall, of course, avoid Eshowe, and then keep along inside the Zulu frontier as far as the Maputa, which is its northern boundary, then we shall cross the Lebombo range into Swaziland. I don't know how far it would be by the way we should have to go, but as the crow flies it is about three hundred miles from here. I suppose, what with the detours and passes and so on, it will be four hundred. Ordinarily that distance could be done in twenty days, but we must allow a good bit longer than that; fifteen miles a day is the utmost we can calculate upon. However, in about a month after we start we ought to be there or thereabouts. Coming back we should do it more quickly, as we should have got rid of our weight and need not be bothered with pack-ponies."

"You talk as coolly about it," Field laughed, "as if you were going out for a few days' picnic."

"It is the same sort of thing," Chris said, "except that it will be longer, a bit rougher, and a good deal more interesting."

"When will you start?"

"As soon as possible; all I have to see about are the dynamite and stores for the journey. We know pretty well by this time what we shall want. We are sure to be able to buy mealies and a bullock when we want one from the natives. Some tea and coffee, a dozen tins of preserved milk, and half a hundredweight of biscuits, in case of finding ourselves at a lonely camp with no native kraals near, and we

shall be all right. Of course we will take a gallon or two of paraffin, a frying-pan, a small kettle, and so on, and a lantern that will burn paraffin. We will fill up our pouches with a hundred rounds of rifle cartridges and fifty for our revolvers, and then I think we shall be ready. Now mind, the success of our enterprise depends entirely upon your all keeping the secret absolutely. Neither Willesden, Brown, nor Peters have friends here to bother themselves about their absence. We are not likely to be missed, but if any questions are asked, you can say casually that we are off on a scouting expedition. I shall write four or five letters, with dates a week or ten days apart, and direct them from here, and leave them for you to post one by one to my mother. Be sure you send them in the right order. As she will suppose that we are stopping here quietly, and out of all harm, she won't be uneasy about me. Peters' and Willesden's friends have gone to England, so they are all right, and Brown's are at the Cape. You had better write two or three letters too, Brown, to be posted a fortnight or three weeks apart."

When these matters were arranged, Chris saw Jack, and the Kaffir agreed without hesitation to go with him. He had been so well treated since he joined them that he had become quite attached to Chris, who generally gave him his orders. He was only told that they were going up on an expedition to Zululand and Swaziland.

"I want you to find two good Zulus and two Swazis. Do you think that you could do that?"

"There are plenty of them here, baas. I look about and get good men. What shall I tell them that they will have to do?"

"To act as guides, to tell the chiefs who we are, and on the

march to look after two or three ponies. We shall only take one of the spare horses, you will look after him."

"Will they have guns, baas? All men like to have guns."

"Yes, they may as well carry guns, and you too, Jack."

"Much better for men to have guns, baas. They would be thought nothing of without them."

"All right, Jack! there shall be no difficulty about that; the stores are full of them."

This was the case. Men entering the volunteer corps, or who intended to do any fighting, sold the rifles they had previously used and obtained those of Government pattern and carrying the regulation cartridge, so that for ten pounds Chris got hold of five really good weapons, carefully selecting those that carried the same-sized cartridge.

"You can take whichever you like," he said to Jack, who had gone with him to buy them; "and I shall tell the men I engage that if at the end of the journey I am well satisfied with their behaviour, I shall give them the guns in addition to their pay."

A few hours afterwards Jack brought up four natives for his inspection. They were all strong and well-built men, and looked capable of hard work. Having been thrown out of their employment by the events of the past fortnight, they were glad of a fresh job, and were highly satisfied when they were offered wages considerably higher than those they had before received. All preparations were completed by the following evening, and the next morning at daybreak, after bidding their comrades a hearty farewell, the little party started.

CHAPTER IX

KOMATI-POORT

THE four lads were no longer dressed in the guise of farmers. These suits were carried in the packs, to be resumed when they neared the Transvaal. They now dressed in the tweeds they had worn at Johannesburg, and either felt hats or straw. They still wore jack-boots. The heat of the day was now great, much more so, indeed, than they had been accustomed to, for while Maritzburg lies two thousand two hundred feet above the sea, Johannesburg is five thousand seven hundred. Behind them Jack led the spare horse, and the four new men stepped lightly along with their muskets slung behind them by the side of two strong Basuto ponies, each carrying a couple of boxes containing half a hundredweight of dynamite. These were concealed from view by sacks and blankets, the cooking utensils, and other light articles. The spare horse carried the flour, paraffin, fuses, and other stores, which brought up the weight to a hundred and twenty pounds. This was somewhat lighter than that carried by the ponies, but they were anxious to keep it in good condition in case one of their own gave out.

The baggage had all been very carefully packed, so that even when going fast it might not be displaced. They had found no difficulty in obtaining the dynamite, as several of the stores kept it for the use of the mines. They made no difficulty in selling it, and would not have been sorry to part with their whole stock. In view of the possibility of a siege, it was not an article that any sane man would

care to keep on the premises. Chris had gone round to these stores and had obtained an offer from each, and as he said that he intended to accept the lowest tender, it was offered to him at a price very much below what he would ordinarily have had to give for it. The cases were sewn up in canvas, on which was painted respectively, Tea, Sugar, Biscuits, and Rice. Travelling five hours and halting at ten o'clock at a farmhouse that was still tenanted, and again travelling from half-past three until eight, they made about twenty-five miles the first day. Then they encamped at a spot where there was a small spring and consequently good feed for the horses, and, knee-haltering them and taking off their saddles, they turned them loose.

The natives had collected fuel as they went along, and a fire was soon made. When the kettle approached boiling, some slices of bacon, of which they had brought thirty pounds with them, were fried. There was no occasion to make bread, as they had enough for a two days' supply. The natives parched some mealies (Indian corn) in the frying-pan when the bacon was done, the fat serving as a condiment that they highly appreciated, and they quenched their thirst from the spring.

Four days' travelling took them to the drift across the Tugela. So far their journey had been wholly uneventful. Before crossing the next day they had a long talk with the two Zulus. Their language differed somewhat from that of Jack, but Chris understood them without difficulty; for a considerable portion of the labourers in the mines at Johannesburg were Zulus, and, mixing with these, as Chris had done, he understood them even better than he did Jack.

The different routes were discussed, and the position of kraals, at which mealies for the five natives and the horses could be purchased, and meat possibly obtained. This, unless they bought a sheep, would be in the form of biltong, that is, strips of meat dried by being hung up in the sun and wind, and similar to the jerked meat of the prairies and pampas of America. The points at which water could be obtained were discussed. Some were at considerable distances apart; but the Zulus were of opinion that the late heavy rains had extended to the hills of Zululand, and that there would be abundance of water in little dongas and water-courses that would be dry after a spell of fine weather. While passing through Zululand there would be no occasion whatever for vigilance by day or a watch at night, for there perfect order reigned. Here and there resident magistrates were stationed, and at these points a few white traders had settled. All disputes between the natives were ordinarily decided by their own chiefs, but in serious cases an appeal could be made to the nearest magistrate, who at once interfered in cases of violence or gross injustice.

At the first kraal they came to they learned that the natives were everywhere much excited. They were most anxious to be allowed to join in the war against their old enemies, and were greatly disappointed on learning from the magistrates that this was only a white man's war, and that no others must take part in it. If, however, the Boers invaded their territory they would, of course, be allowed to defend themselves.

Some of the Zulus urged, with reason, that though the English might wish to make it a white man's war, the Boers did

not desire it to be so, for they knew that they had been urging the Swazis and the Basutos to join them against the English, and that offers of many rifles and much plunder had been made also to some of their own chiefs. To this the magistrates could only reply, that they knew of old that the Boers' words could not be trusted, and that they were always ready to break any arrangement that they had made. "They would like you to join them," they said, "because they would take your help, and afterwards turn against you and steal your land. You know well enough that we have always stood between you and them; but they would know that if you had joined them against us we should be angry, and after our war with them was over would no longer protect you." The Zulus, from their knowledge of the Boers, felt that this would be so. But in any case no offers made to them would have induced them to side with the Boers; and it was the general hope that something might occur which would induce the English to allow them to attack their enemies.

Chris and his friends had laid aside their bandoliers, retaining only the cartridges carried in their belts, in order to assume the appearance of Englishmen merely travelling for sport, and as they went on they generally managed to shoot deer enough for the needs of the whole party. Occasionally they slept in the kraals of chiefs, but greatly preferred their own little tents, as the smoke in them was often blinding, and more than once the attacks of vermin kept them awake. Still, it would have been a slight to refuse such invitations, and they had to go to the kraals as it was necessary to frequently buy supplies of mealies. At times the travelling was very rough, and with the utmost exertions they could not make

more than twelve or fourteen miles a day, and at other times they could make five-and-twenty. Without the supply of Indian corn the ponies could not have continued this rate of going without breaking down. The native horses are accustomed occasionally to make very long journeys, and can perform from sixty to eighty miles in a day, but after such an exertion they will need a week's rest before making another effort. With their Basuto masters they are not called upon to do so. When one of these makes a long journey he will leave his pony with the person he visits and return on a fresh mount, or if he returns to his own home after his first day's journey he will take a fresh horse from his own stock, which may vary from five to fifty ponies.

As they rode they seldom talked of the work that was to be done. Until they saw the country, the positions, and approach, no plans could possibly be formed, and they therefore treated the matter as if it were a mere sporting expedition in a new country, and enjoyed themselves thoroughly. They had heavy work in crossing the Lebombo range, and, travelling a day's journey farther west, turned to the north again. They were now in Swaziland, a wild and mountainous country. Here also they were hospitably received where they stopped, although the Swazis were deeply aggrieved by the shameful manner in which England had refused, after the valuable aid they had rendered in the last war, to give them any support against the Boers. A word would have been sufficient to have kept the latter out of Swaziland, as it had kept them from raiding in Zululand; but that word was not given, and the unfortunate people had been raided and plundered, their best land taken from them, and they themselves reduced to a state

of semi-subjection. However, they were glad to see four English sportsmen among them again, and to learn something of the war that had broken out between their oppressors and the British.

"If you beat them we shall be free again," they said. "Last time you were beaten, and gave over the whole country to the Boers, and left all our people, who had fought for you, at their mercy. This time you must not do that. If you beat them, shoot them all like dogs, or make slaves of them as they make slaves of the natives who dwell in their land. Only so will there be peace."

"I don't know that the English will do that," Chris said; "but you may be sure that, when the war is over, the Boers will be no longer masters, and there will be just law made by us, and all white men and all natives will be protected, and no evil deeds will be allowed."

"We are no longer united among ourselves," one of the chiefs said. "Some have been taken by the promises and gifts of the Boers, and our queen is also, it is said, in their favour. She is afraid of them, but most of us would take advantage of their fighting you to drive all of them out of our land, and to win back all the territory they have taken from us. We are very poor, our best land is gone, we can scarce grow enough food; and we long for the time when once again we can have rich mealie patches, and good grazing land for our oxen and our horses, and are again a strong people, and they afraid of us. Had not the English interfered and taken over the Boer country, we should have wasted it from end to end; and they knew it well, and begged your Shepstone to hoist your flag and protect them. Ah, he

should have stayed there then! The natives, our friends in the plain, still talk of that happy time when you were masters, and the Boers dared no longer shoot them down as if they were wild beasts, and treat them as slaves, and the towns grew up, and your people paid for work with money and not with the lash of a whip or a bullet. All of us have mourned over the time when the English bent their knee to the Boers, and gave them all they wanted,—the mastery of the land, and the right to kill and enslave us at their will."

"That was not quite so," Chris said. "They promised to give good treatment to the natives; that was one of the conditions of the treaty."

"And you believed them!" the chief said scornfully. "Did you not know that a Boer's oath is only good so long as a gun is pointed at him? Perhaps it will be like this again, and when you have conquered them you will again trust them, and march away. But they tell us, it is not you who will conquer them, but they who will conquer you. They tell our people that they will be masters over all the land, and that your people will have to sail away in your ships. Runners have brought us news that they have gathered round the place where our people go to work digging bright stones from the ground, and that very soon they will take all the English prisoners, and that they have also beset Mafeking, and that they have beaten the English soldiers in Natal, and there will soon be none left there; and more than that, that the people of the other Boer state have joined them, and have entered the English territory, and are being joined by all the Boers there. Therefore we, who would like to fight against them, are afraid. We thought the English a great

people; they had beaten the Zulus, and dethroned the great King Cetewayo. But now it seems that the Boers are much greater, and our hearts are sore."

"You need not fear, chief," Chris said. "Our country is very many miles away, many days' journey in ships; it will take weeks before our army gets strong. The Boers have always said they wanted peace, and we believed them and kept but a few soldiers here, and until the army comes from England they will get the best of it; but we can send, if necessary, an army many times stronger than that of the Boers, and are sure to crush them in the end."

"But how could you believe they wanted peace?" the chief asked. "Everyone knew that they were building great forts, and had got guns bigger than were ever before seen, and stores full of rifles. How could you believe their words when your eyes saw that it was not peace but war that they meant?"

"Because we were fools, I suppose," Chris said bitterly. "It was not from want of warnings, for people living out here had written again and again telling what vast preparations they were making, but the people who govern the country paid no attention. It was much easier to believe what was pleasant than what was unpleasant; but their folly will cost the country very dear. If they had sent over twenty thousand men a year ago there would have been no war; now they will have to send over a hundred thousand men, perhaps even more; and great sums of money will be spent, and great numbers of lives lost, simply because our government refused to believe what everyone out here knew to be the fact. We did nothing, and allowed the Boers to complete all their preparations, and

to choose their own time for war. But though we have made a horrible mistake, do not think, chief, that there is any doubt about our conquering at last; the men who now govern our country are men and not cowards, and will not, as that other government did, go on their knees to the Boers, and even if they would do so, the people would not sanction it."

"If what the chief has heard is correct," Chris said as they rode along the next morning, "we must get back again as soon as we can. The Boers may be lying, and, of course, they would make the best of things to the Swazis. It certainly sounds as if not only at Ladysmith, but at all other places, things are going badly at present. However, in another couple of days we shall not be far from the bridge. The chief said that the frontier was only a few miles away, and our own men tell us that it is a very hilly country on the other side, just as it is here. We have certainly come faster than we had expected. Thanks to their good feeding, the horses have all turned out well. If it is really only two days farther, we shall get there in just three weeks from starting."

They had not brought the same ponies all the way; as soon as one showed signs of fatigue, it was changed for another, with the arrangement that, should they return that way, they would take it back and give the chief a present for having seen that it was taken care of. The four natives, although well contented with the way in which they were fed and cared for, were much puzzled at the eagerness of their employers to push on, and the disregard they paid to all the information obtained for them of opportunities for sport. Several times they had said to Jack: "How is it the baas does not stop to shoot? There are plenty

of deer, and in some places lions. There are zebras, too, though these are not easy to get at, and very difficult to stalk. Why do you push on so fast that the ponies have to be left behind, and others taken on? We cannot understand it. We have been with white men who came into our country to shoot, or to see what the land was like, but they did not travel like this. Besides, we shall soon be in the land of the Boers, and as the English are at war with them, they will shoot them if they find them."

Jack had only been told that his masters were going to strike a blow at the Boers, and had not troubled himself as to its nature. He had seen how they had defeated much larger parties than their own, and had unbounded confidence in them. He therefore only said:

"The baas has not told me. I know that all the gentlemen are very brave, and have no fear of the Boers. I do not think that we need fear that any harm will happen. They shoot enough for us to eat heartily, they buy drink for us at every kraal they stop at, and if they have seen no game they buy a sheep. What can we want more? They have got you guns, but you have never needed to use them; perhaps you may before you get back. If the Boers meddle with them you will be able to fight."

The prospect of a chance of being allowed to fight against the Boers would alone have inspired the four natives to bear any amount of fatigue without a murmur, and each day's march farther north had heightened their hopes that they might use their guns against their old enemies. It was on the twenty-first day after starting that, from a hill commanding a broad extent of country, they caught sight of a train of waggons,

and knew that their journey was just at an end. They had debated which side of the Komati river would be the best to follow, and had agreed to take the eastern bank.

The Boer territory extended a few miles beyond this. Komati-poort was close to the frontier. As they knew nothing as to the construction of the bridge beyond the fact that it was iron, and were not even sure whether it was entirely on Boer ground, or if the eastern bank of the river here belonged to the Portuguese, they decided that at any rate it was better to travel as near the frontier as possible, as, were they pursued, they could ride at once across the line. Not that they believed that the Boers would respect this, but they would not know the country so well as that on their own side, and would not find countrymen to join them in the pursuit.

Keeping down on the eastern side of the hills, they continued until they could see the white line of steam that showed the direction in which a train from the south-east was coming, and were therefore able to calculate within half a mile where the bridge must be situated. They camped in a dry donga, and next morning at daybreak left their horses behind them in charge of the men and walked forward. A mile farther they obtained a view of the bridge. It stood at the point where the river, after running for some little distance north-west, made a sharp curve to the south. The bridge stood at this loop. If the object had been to render it defensible, it had been admirably chosen by those Boers who laid out the line to the Portuguese frontier, for from the other side of the bank the approach could be swept by cannon and even musketry on both flanks.

Lying down, they took in all the details of the construction through their glasses, and then, choosing their ground so that they could not be seen by any on the bridge, they kept on until they were able to obtain a view from a distance of a quarter of a mile. The examination that was now made was by no means of a satisfactory nature. Near the bridge there were sidings on which several lines of loaded trucks stood. An engine was at work shunting. At least a score of natives were at work under the direction of Portuguese, while several men, who were by their dress evidently Boers, were pointing out to the officials the trucks they desired to be first forwarded. Three or four of these carried huge cases, two of them being each long enough to occupy two trucks.

"There is no doubt those are guns," Chris said. "If we can do nothing else, we can work a lot of damage here, which will be some sort of satisfaction after our long ride. As to our main object, things don't look well."

Half a dozen armed Boers could be made out stationed at the Portuguese side of the bridge, and as many more at the opposite end. Two lately-erected wooden huts, each of which could give shelter to some fifty men, stood a short distance beyond the bridge, and it was evident by the figures moving about, and a number of horses grazing near, that a strong party was stationed there to furnish guards for the bridge.

"I am afraid we cannot do it," Peters said, after their glasses had all been fixed on the bridge for several minutes; "at least, I don't see any chance. What do you say, Chris?"

"No, I am afraid there is none. If we were to crawl up to them to-night and shoot down all at this end of the bridge.

we should be no nearer. You see, there is a line of huts on this side, and two or three better-class houses. No doubt the railway officials and natives all live there; they would all turn out when they heard the firing, and the Boers would come rushing over from the other side. It would be out of the question for us to carry forward those four boxes to the middle of the bridge, plant them over the centre of the girders, and light the fuses. A quarter of an hour would be wanted for the business at the very least, and we should not have a minute, if there is as good a guard by night as there is by day. It is likely to be at least as large, perhaps much more than that. The thing is impossible in that way. However, of course we can crawl up close after dark and satisfy ourselves about the guard.

"If it is not to be managed in that way, we must go down to the river bank and see whether there is anything to be done with one of the piers. If that is not possible, we must content ourselves with smashing things up generally on this side. Several of the trucks look to me to be full of ammunition, and there are eight with long cases which are no doubt rifles. We all remember that terrific smash at Johannesburg, and though I don't say we could do such awful damage as there was there—for there were I don't know how many tons of dynamite exploded then, I think about fifty—still, it would be a heavy blow. Any amount of stores would be destroyed, some thousand of rifles, and, for aught I know, all those waggons with tarpaulins over them are full of cartridges. However, the bridge is the principal thing. We will stop here for an hour or two and examine every foot of the ground, so as to be able to find our way in the dark. We need not mind

about the trucks now, we can examine their position to-morrow if we have to give up the idea of the bridge."

On returning to their horses they had a long talk. Chris was deeply disappointed, but the others, who had never quite believed that his scheme could be carried out, were greatly delighted at the knowledge that at any rate they might be able to do an immense deal of damage to the enemy. As soon as it became quite dark they set out again; they did not take their rifles with them, but each had his brace of revolvers. They had no intention of fighting, except to secure a retreat. Before starting, each had wound strips of flannel round his boots, so that they could run noiselessly. Brown had in the first place suggested that they should take their boots off, but Chris pointed out that if they had to run in the dark, one or other of them was sure to lame himself by striking against a stone or other obstacle. There were several large fires in the shunting-yard, and at each end of the bridge, and at the Boer barracks. Crawling along on their hands and knees they were completely in the shade, and managed to get within some twenty or thirty yards of the Boers, who were sitting smoking and talking.

They were all evidently greatly satisfied with news that they had heard during the day. Listening to their talk, they gathered something of what had happened since they left Estcourt. Colenso had been evacuated by us, an armoured train coming up from Estcourt had been thrown off the line, and most of the soldiers with it had been killed or captured. The last news was that the British had sallied out from Estcourt, which was now surrounded, and had attacked the Boers posted in a very strong position near a place called

Willow Grange, but had been repulsed, principally by the artillery, with, it was said, immense loss. This was not pleasant hearing for the listeners. The Boers then had a grumble at being kept so far away from the fighting. It was not that they were so anxious to be engaged, as to get a share of the loot, as it had been reported that something like twenty thousand cattle and horses had been driven off from Natal.

Then their conversation turned upon a point still more interesting to the listeners. A commando had started from Barberton, a border town some thirty or forty miles to the west, into Swaziland. A native had mentioned to one of the Boers there that four Englishmen had passed north. They had stopped at his chief's kraal. They were all quite young, and had five natives with them, and three pack-horses. They had come to shoot and see the country, they said; but they had spoken with one of the men with them, who said that so far they had not done much hunting, only enough for food; he supposed that they were going to begin farther on. The Boer had, an hour later, ridden down to Barberton with the news, and it had been at once resolved to send off a commando of a hundred men to search the hills, for there was a suspicion that the hunters were British officers who had come up to act as spies.

"Our cornet had a telegram this afternoon," one of them said, "that we were to be specially vigilant here, and we must keep a sharp look-out at night. I don't suppose they are on this side of the river. They may be going to pull up the railway, or blow up a culvert somewhere between this and Barberton. Four men with their Kaffirs might do that, but they certainly could not damage this bridge."

At ten o'clock most of the party retired into a small shed a few yards away, but two remained sitting by the fire, and were evidently left on guard, for they kept their rifles close at hand. The lads now crawled away some distance, and then made their way down a steep bank to the river. It was a stream of some size, running with great rapidity, and it did not take them long to decide that it would be impossible to swim out with the cases and place these in such a situation that the explosion would damage the structure. They then moved quietly up to the spot where the end of the last span touched the level ground; it rested upon a solid wall built into the rock, and ran some forty feet above their heads. They were now just under where the Boers were sitting, could hear their voices, and see the glow of their fire. They were unable to make out the exact position of the girders, but they had, when watching it, obtained a general view of the construction.

It consisted of two lines of strong girders on each side, connected by lattice bars, with strong communications between the sides at each pier. The depth of the girders was some twenty feet. After cautiously feeling the wall and finding that there were no openings in which their explosives could be placed, they crawled away noiselessly, ascended to the bank again a couple of hundred yards from the bridge, and returned to their camping ground. They observed as they went that there were still fires burning in the station yard, that some Kaffirs were seated near these, and as, in the silence of the night, a faint sound could be heard like that of a distant train, they had no doubt that they were waiting up for one to arrive. Indeed, before they had reached the camping

place they saw a train pass by. It had no lights save the head-lights and that of the engine fire, and they therefore had no doubt that it was another train with stores.

When they reached their tents they had a long consultation. No fire had been lighted. The horses had been taken some way up a little ravine down which a stream of water trickled; here the four natives had taken up their post. These had only come down in the middle of the day to fetch their food, which Jack cooked over the spirit-stove. This was alight when the lads returned, but was carefully screened round by blankets so that not the slightest glow could be seen from a distance.

"What do you think of it, Chris?" Brown said.

"I don't know what to think about it. I have no idea what effect dynamite would have when exploded at a distance of thirty or forty feet below a bridge. Certainly it would blow the roadway up, but I have very great doubts whether it would so twist or smash the main girders as to render the bridge impassable. The distance to the first pier is not great, and unless one entirely destroyed the bridge, I should say that it could be repaired very soon—I mean, in a week or two—by a strong gang. If the girders kept their places, two or three days' work might patch it up temporarily. If it were destroyed altogether as far as the first pier, it would stop the cannon getting over till a temporary bridge is constructed; but by rigging up some strong cables, they could pass cases of musket ammunition across the gap in the same way, you know, as I have seen pictures of shipwrecked people being swung along under a cable in a sort of cradle. What do you think, Peters?"

"Two hundred pounds of dynamite would do a lot of damage, Chris. I should think that it would certainly bring the wall down."

"I have no doubt that it would do that, Peters, but the ironwork goes some ten yards farther, and no doubt rests on the solid rock. I expect the wall is put there more to finish the thing off than to carry much of the weight. Again, you see it is only a single line, and not above ten feet wide, which is against us, for the wider the line the better chance it has of being smashed by an explosion some forty feet below it. Well, we will have another look at the bridge and the waggons to-morrow. Of course the bridge is the great thing if it can be managed, though I don't say that blowing up the yard would not be a good thing if we can't make sure of the other. Anyhow, we need not feel downhearted about it. We came up here on the chance, and even though we may not be able to do exactly what we want, we ought to manage to do them a lot of damage."

After eating their supper they turned in to their two little tents. The spirit-lamp had been extinguished, and as they had not the least fear of discovery, they did not consider it necessary to place a sentinel. In the morning they were out again early and at their former post of observation.

"What are they up to now?" Brown said an hour later when he saw a party of Boers come down the opposite side close to the bridge, carrying posts and planks.

Chris made no answer, he was watching them intently. They stopped near the bank of the river close to the bridge. Then some of them set to work to level a space of ground, while others made holes at the corners.

"I am afraid that it is all up with our plans as far as the bridge is concerned. They are going to put up a hut there, and I have not the least doubt it means they are going to station a guard under the bridge. If they do it that side, they are probably doing the same on this, only we can't see them. The Boers are stupid enough in some things, but they are sharp enough in others, and it is possible that the commando from Barberton has come upon one of the kraals where we slept, and, asking a lot of questions about us, they have found out that we had four heavy boxes with us, and the idea may have struck them that these contained explosives. If that did occur to them, it is almost certain that a man has been sent off at once to Barberton with orders to telegraph here and to other bridges, to take every precaution against their being blown up. Anyhow, there is a hut building there, and I don't see that it can be for any other purpose."

After three hours' work the hut was completed, and a party of eight men brought down blankets and other kit. Two of these at once ascended the bank with their rifles and sat down at the foot of the wall.

"That ends the business," Chris said. "However, I will creep round to a point where I can get a view of this side of the bridge. Possibly they have only taken precautions on their own side, for we were travelling for some time in the Swazis' country to the west of the Komati, and that is where they will have heard of us."

He crawled away among the rocks, and rejoined his companions an hour later.

"It is just the same this side. They have settled the question for us. Now we will give our attention to the waggons."

CHAPTER X

AN EXPLOSION

HAVING given up all hopes of blowing up the bridge, Chris and his comrades turned their whole attention to the lines of waggons. The train that had come in on the previous evening had added to the number, although it had taken some of them away with it up-country. They now made out that there were eight waggons piled with cases, that almost certainly contained rifles; six with tarpaulins closely placed over them, and these they guessed contained ammunition-boxes; four, each with two large cases that might contain field-guns; while the two with what they were sure were big guns still remained on the siding.

"I should say that about four or five pounds of dynamite would be an abundance for each of those ammunition-waggons; less than that would do, as we could, by slitting the tarpaulins, put a pound among the cases, and if one case were exploded it would set all the others off. There is no trouble about them. I will just take a note. They are on the second siding; there are eight other waggons in front of them and six behind, so we cannot make any mistake about that. There must be a good heavy charge under the rifle trucks, for we shall have to blow them all well into the air to bend and damage them enough to be altogether unserviceable. As for the guns, and especially the heavy ones, it is a difficult question. Of course, if we could open the cases and get at the breech-pieces, and put dynamite among them, we could damage all the mechanism so much that the guns would be useless until

new breech-pieces were made, which I fancy must be altogether beyond the Boers; but as there is no possibility of opening them, we must trust to blowing the guns so high in the air that they will be too much damaged for use by the explosion and fall. We have got altogether two hundredweight; now two pounds to each ammunition-waggon will take twelve pounds. What shall we say for the rifles?"

"Ten pounds," Brown suggested.

"That would take eighty more pounds," Willesden objected, "which would make a big hole in our stores."

"We must have a good charge," Chris said. "Suppose we say nine pounds to each, that will save eight pounds; fifteen pounds apiece ought to give the eight cases which we suppose hold field-guns a good hoist; that will leave us with over a hundred pounds, fifty for each of the big guns. Now that we have seen all that is necessary, we may as well be off and begin to get ready."

The covers were taken off the boxes of dynamite, and these were unscrewed, and the explosive was with great care divided into the portions as agreed upon. Two of the cases furnished just sufficient for the ammunition-waggons and the two big guns, the other two for the smaller cannon and the trucks with the rifles. The charges were sewn up in pieces of the canvas, the smaller charges for the ammunition-boxes being enclosed in thinner stuff that had been sewn under the canvas used in packing; the fuses and detonators were then cut and inserted. Chris was perfectly up in this work, having performed the operation scores of times in the mines. The length it should burn was only decided after a discussion.

There would be in all nineteen charges to explode, and

these were in three groups at some little distance from each other, all the cannon being on the same siding. It would be necessary, perhaps, to wait for some time till all these were free from observation by natives or others who might be moving about the yard, then a signal must be given that they could all see. It would not take long to light the fuses, for each of them would be provided with a slow-match, which burns with but a spark, and could be held under a hat or an inverted tin cup till the time came for using it. The question was how far must they be away to ensure their own safety, and Chris maintained that at least four or five hundred yards would be necessary to place them in even comparative safety from the rain of fragments that would fall over a wide area. Finally, it was agreed to cut the fuses to a length to burn four minutes; this would allow a minute for any hitch that might occur in lighting them, and three minutes to burn. It was, of course, important that they should be no longer than was absolutely necessary, as there existed a certain risk that one of the little sparks might be seen by a passing Kaffir, or, as was still more probable, the smell of burning powder should attract attention. It was agreed that Chris should light the fuses at the cannon which were farthest from the others, that Peters should see to the six rifle trucks, and Willesden and Brown attend the eight trucks with the ammunition, one to begin at each end of the line.

When each had finished his work, he was to run straight away in the direction of the encampment, and all were to throw themselves down when they felt sure that the time for the explosions had arrived. As soon as all was over they were to meet at their place of encampment. Tents and all stores

were to be removed, before the work began, to the ravine where the horses were, the men with them being charged to stand at the animals' heads, as there would be a great explosion, and the horses might break loose and stampede. The matter that puzzled them the most was how, when they reached their respective stations—separated from each other by lines of waggons, and in some cases by distances of a couple of hundred yards—they were to know when the work of lighting the fuses was to begin. It could not be done by sound, for this would reach the ears of any awake in the yard or the sentries at the bridge. Chris at last suggested a plan.

"When we start, Jack shall be stationed at a point on the hillside high enough for us to see him from all points of the yard. We will show him the exact spot while it is light. When we start he shall go down with us to the edge of the yard, and as we separate will turn and go up to the point we had shown him. He will be ordered to walk up quietly, and not to hurry; that will give us ample time to get to our stations before he reaches his. We must all keep our eyes fixed on that point. He will take the dark lantern with him; when he gets there he must turn the shade off, so as to show the light for a quarter of a minute. That will be our signal to begin. It is most unlikely that anyone else will see it, but even if they did they would simply stare in that direction and wonder what it was. Of course, only a flash would be safer; but some of us might not see it, and would remain waiting for it until the other explosions took place."

All agreed that this would be a very good plan. Chris crawled up with Jack until he reached a spot where he commanded a perfect view of the yard, and explained to him exactly

what he was to do. He had already been told what was going to take place. Knowing that the Kaffirs have very little idea of time, he said: "You will hold it open while you say slowly like this, 'I am showing the light, baas, and I hope that you can all see it.' You will say that over twice and then turn off the light, and lie down under that big rock till you hear the explosion. Wait a little, for stones and fragments will come tumbling down. When they have stopped doing so make your way straight to where the horses are; you will find us there before you. Now, repeat over to me the words you are to say slowly twice."

Jack did so, and finding on questioning him that he perfectly understood what he was to do, Chris went back with him to the encampment, where they remained quietly until the sun set and darkness came on. Then, according to arrangement, the four natives came in and carried all the things back to the ravine, and laid them down ready to pack the horses as soon as their masters returned.

The day passed slowly to the lads. All were in a state of suppressed excitement, an excitement vastly greater than they had felt during their two fights with the Boers.

"How they will wonder who did it when they hear the news down in Natal!" Peters said.

"I don't expect they will hear much about it," Chris said. "You may be sure the Boers will not say much; they make a big brag over every success, but they won't care to publish such a thing as this. Probably their papers will only say: 'An explosion of a trifling nature occurred on the Portuguese side of Komati-poort. Some barrels of powder exploded; it is unknown whether it was the result of accident

or the work of spies. Due precaution will be taken to prevent the recurrence of the accident. Beyond a few natives employed at the station, no one was hurt.'"

The others laughed. "I suppose that will be about it, Chris. However, I have no doubt that that commando from Barberton will keep a very sharp look-out for us as we go back."

"Yes, but they won't catch us. We won't venture into Swaziland again, but will make our way down on the Portuguese side, following the railway till we are fairly beyond the mountain range. We can ride fast now that we have got rid of the dynamite. It will be some time before they get the news about what has happened here, for the telegraph wires are sure to be broken and the instruments smashed. I really think that our best way will be to ride straight down to Lorenzo Marques. When we get there we can very well state that we had been ordered to leave Johannesburg, and that, as the trains are so slow and so crowded with fugitives, we had ridden down. I don't suppose that we shall attract the least notice, for we know that a great many of those who had intended to stay have been ordered off. That way we shall get back to Natal in a few days and avoid all danger."

The others agreed that this would be a capital plan; and the distance by the road, which they had crossed a few miles to the south, and which runs from Lorenzo Marques up to Ladysdorp and the Murchison and Klein Lemba gold-fields, would not be above seventy miles. They would wait till daybreak showed them the amount of damage that had been done, and then start, and would be down at Lorenzo Marques in the evening, when, even if the news of the explosion reached the town, the Boers' suspicions that some Englishmen were in

the hills, and that it was probably their work, would not be known. Not until ten o'clock was a move made. Then they took up the packages of dynamite, and, accompanied by Jack, made their way noiselessly down to the railway yard.

Here they separated. Chris, aided by Jack, carried the big packets for the large guns and for the eight smaller ones. They met no one about, and depositing their packages in the right position under them—the fuses had been already inserted—they returned to the spot they had left. In a minute or two they were joined by the others. Peters had placed his parcels under the eight trucks with rifles; Willesden and Brown had cut holes in the tarpaulins of the ammunition, trucks, and thrust down their charges well among the boxes. All was ready. While the others stood closely round him Jack opened the lantern just widely enough for them to light their slow-matches.

"Now, you are not to hurry back to the place, Jack; we shall all be on the look-out for you by the time you get there. You know your instructions; you are to turn round, open the slide of the lantern, say the words I told you over twice slowly, then shut the lantern and get under that great boulder lying against the rock. You will be perfectly safe in there."

"I understand, baas," he said, and at once turned and went off. The others hurried to their respective posts, and then turned round and gazed at the spot where the light would be shown. In their anxiety and excitement the time seemed interminable, and each began to think that the native had somehow blundered; at last the light appeared, and they turned at once to their work. Half a minute sufficed to light the fuses, and then they hurried away cautiously until past all the

waggons, and then at full speed along the hillside, their thickly-padded shoes making no noise upon the rocks. Knowing that they were sure to be confused as to the time, they had calculated before the sun had set how far they could run in three minutes, which should be, if all went well, the time they would have after leaving the yard. They thought that even on the rough ground, and in the dark, they could make a hundred and fifty yards a minute, and at about four hundred and fifty from the waggons there was a low ridge of rock behind which they would obtain protection from all fragments blown directly outwards.

Chris was the first to arrive, for the trucks with the cannon were those farthest away from the bridge, and he was able to run for some distance along the line before making for the slope, and therefore travelled faster than his companions, who had farther to run on broken ground. In half a minute they rushed up almost together.

"Throw yourselves down," Chris shouted; "we shall have it directly."

Twenty seconds later there was a tremendous roar and a blinding crash, and they felt the ground shake. Almost simultaneously came eight others, then in quick succession followed six other reports, and mingled with these a confused roar of innumerable shots blended together. There was a momentary pause, and then a deafening clatter as rifles, fragments of iron and wood came falling down over a wide area. Several fell close to where the lads were crouched against the rock, but none touched them. For a full half-minute the fragments continued to fall, then the boys stood up and looked round. It was too dark to see more than that the yard was

M 683

"THERE WAS A TREMENDOUS ROAR AND A BLINDING CRASH"

a chaos; the long lines of waggons, the huts and buildings, had all disappeared; loud shouts could be heard from the other side of the bridge, but nearer to them everything was silent. There was no doubt that the success of the attempt was complete, and the lads walked back quietly until they were at the spot where the horses had been placed, Jack overtaking them just as they reached it.

"It was terrible, baas," he said in an awed voice. "Jack thought his life was gone. Things fell on the rock but could not break it."

"Nothing short of one of those big cannon would have done that, Jack. Well, we shall see in the morning what damage is done."

The four natives, although they had been warned, were still terribly frightened. The horses had at the first crash broken away and run up the ravine, but they had just brought them down again, still trembling and lathering with fear. For some minutes the boys patted and soothed them, and, accustomed to their voices and caresses, they gradually quieted down, but were very restless until day began to break. The boys had no thought of sleep. The lamp was lit and tea made, and each of the Kaffirs was given a glass of spirits and water, for they had brought up a bottle with them in case of illness or any special need; and it was evident from their chattering teeth and broken speech that the natives needed a stimulant badly. Before it became light the horses were saddled, and the five natives told to take them along the hill a mile farther. When they had seen them off, the lads returned to their former post above the station. They had several times, when they looked out during the night, seen a

great light in that direction, and had no doubt that some of the fallen huts had caught fire.

Prepared as they were for a scene of destruction, the reality far exceeded their expectations. All the waggons within a considerable distance of the explosions were smashed into fragments, their wheels broken, and the axles twisted. The ammunition-trucks had disappeared, and many close to them had been completely shattered. Those in which the muskets had been were a mere heap of fragments; the rest of the trucks lay, some with their sides blown in, others comparatively uninjured. Some were piled on the top of others three or four deep; their contents were scattered over the whole yard. Boxes and cases were burst open, and their contents—including large quantities of tea, sugar, tinned provisions in vast quantities, and other stores—ruined.

Some still smoking brands showed where the huts had stood, and the dead bodies of some twenty natives and several Portuguese officials were scattered here and there. The bodies of eight Boers were laid out together by the bridge, and forty or fifty men were wandering aimlessly amid the ruins. A huge cannon stood upright nearly in the centre of the yard. It had fallen on its muzzle, which had penetrated some feet into the earth. They could not see where its fellow had fallen. Five others, which looked like fifteen-pounders, were lying in different directions; the other three had disappeared. Rifles twisted, bent, and ruined were lying about everywhere.

"It is not as good as the bridge," Chris said after they had used their glasses for some time in silence, "but it is a heavy blow for them, and I should think it will be a week before the line can be cleared ready for traffic. Even when they

begin they will feel the loss of so much rolling-stock. There were five engines in the yard. Every one of these has been upset, and will want a lot of repairs before it is fit for anything again. I wish I had a kodak with me to take a dozen snapshots, it would be something worth showing when we get back. Well, we may as well be moving. The Boers look as if they were stupefied at present, but they will be waking up presently, and the sooner we start for Lorenzo Marques the better."

Half an hour later they had mounted and were on their way, travelling slowly till they came upon the road, and then at a fast pace. Jack rode the spare horse, the other natives rode the ponies in turn, those on foot keeping up without difficulty by laying a hand on the saddles. Sometimes they trotted for two or three miles, and then went at a walk for half an hour, and stopped altogether for four hours in the heat of the day, for they were now getting on to low land, being only some three hundred feet above the sea. They reached Lorenzo Marques at about nine o'clock in the evening, and, failing to find beds, for the town was full of emigrants from the Transvaal, they camped in the open. In the morning they sold the two ponies, and were fortunate in finding a steamer lying there that would start the next day. Being very unwilling to part with their horses they arranged for deck passages for them, taking their own risk of injury to them in case of rough weather setting in. Every berth was already engaged, but this mattered little to them, as they could sleep upon the planks as well as on the ground.

They found that there was some excitement in the town, as there was a report that there had been an explosion and much damage done near Komati-poort. No particulars were, how-

ever, known, as the railway officials maintained a strict silence as to the affair. It was known, however, that the telegraphic communication with the Transvaal was broken, and that three trains filled with Kaffir labourers, and accompanied by a number of officials and a company of soldiers, had gone up early that morning. Among the fugitives strong hopes were expressed that the damage had been serious enough to interrupt the traffic for some little time, and to cause serious inconvenience to the Boers, and some even hazarded the hope that the bridge had suffered. This, however, seemed unlikely in the extreme.

Fortunately the weather was fine on the run down to Durban, and the passage of three hundred miles was effected in twenty-four hours. It was now just a month since they had left Maritzburg, and as soon as they landed with their horses and followers they learned that much had taken place during that time.

They had started on the 10th of November. The Boers were then steadily advancing, and so great did the danger appear, that Durban had been strongly fortified by the blue-jackets, aided by Kaffir labour. On the 25th Sir Redvers Buller had arrived, and by this time a considerable force was gathered at Estcourt. The British advance began from that town on the following day. The place had been entirely cut off, Boers occupying the whole country as far as the Mooi river. General Hildyard, who commanded at Estcourt, had been obliged to march out several times to keep them at a distance from the town, and one or two sharp artillery engagements had taken place, the Boers being commanded by General Joubert in person. They had always retired a short distance, but their

movements were so rapid that it was useless to follow; and the troops had each time fallen back to Estcourt. On the 28th the Boers had blown up the bridge across the Tugela, and our army was moving forward, and a great battle was expected shortly.

On landing Chris rode at once to the address given by his mother, and found that she had sailed for Cape Town a week before. Riding then to the railway, he found that the line was closed altogether to passenger traffic, but that a train with some troops and a strong detachment of sailors was going up that evening. Learning that a naval officer was in command, as the military consisted only of small parties of men who had been left behind, when their regiments left, to look after and forward their stores, he went to him. He had, before landing, donned his civilian suit.

"What can I do for you, sir?" the officer, who was watching a party loading trucks with sheep, asked.

"My name is King, sir. I have just returned from an expedition to Komati, I and three friends with me, and we have succeeded in blowing up a large number of waggons containing a battery of field-artillery, two very heavy long guns, which, by the marks on the case, came from Creusot, some eight or ten thousand rifles, and six truck-loads of ammunition."

"The deuce you have!" the officer said, looking with great surprise at the lad who told him this astonishing tale. Then sharply he added: "Are you speaking the truth, sir? You will find it the worse for you if you are not."

"What I say is perfectly true," Chris said quietly. "We only arrived an hour since from Lorenzo Marques. This open letter from General Yule will show you that the party of boys

of whom I was the leader, have done some good service before now."

The officer opened and read the letter. "I must beg your pardon for having doubted your word," he said, as he handed it back. "After adventuring into a Boer camp, and giving so heavy a lesson to a superior force of the enemy, I can quite imagine you capable of carrying out the adventure you have just spoken of. Now, sir, what can I do for you?"

"I have come to ask if you will allow myself and my three friends to accompany you."

"That I will most certainly. And indeed, as you have a report to make of this matter to General Buller, you have a right to go on by the first military train. Is there anything else?"

"Yes, sir; I should be greatly obliged if you will authorize the station-master to attach a carriage to the train to take our five horses."

"I will go with you to him," the officer said. "I can't say whether that can be managed or not."

The station-master at first said that it was impossible, for his orders were for a certain number of carriages and trucks, and with those orders from the commanding officer he could not add to the number.

"But you might slip it on behind, Mr. Station-master," the officer said. "There are four gentlemen going up with a very important report to Sir Redvers Buller."

"I would do it willingly enough," the station-master said, "but the commanding officer is bound to be down here with his staff, and he would notice the horses directly."

"They might be put in a closed van, sir," Chris urged.

"And as there are so many full of stores, it would naturally be supposed that this was also loaded with them."

The official smiled. "Well, young gentleman, I will do what I can for you. As the officer in command of the train has consented, I can fall back upon his authority if there should be any fuss about it. The train will start at eight this evening; you had better have your horses here two hours before that. Entrain them on the other side of the yard, and I will have the waggon attached to the train quietly as soon as you have got them in. The general is not likely to be down here till half an hour before the train starts, and it is certainly not probable that he will count the number of carriages."

It was now half-past five, and Chris joined his friends, who were waiting with the horses and Kaffirs near the station. They had hardly expected him so soon, as they did not know that his mother had left.

"Good news!" he said. "There is a through train going up this evening, and I have got permission for us and the horses to go; but they must be put in a truck by half-past six, and we may as well get them in at once. We still have our water-skins; the Kaffirs had better get them filled at once, and a good supply of mealies for the horses on the way; there is no saying how long we may be. Willesden, do you run in to a store and get a supply of bread and a cold ham for ourselves; a good stock of bread for the Kaffirs, and a jar of water, and a hamper, with a lock, containing two dozen bottles of beer, the mildest you can get, for them. We are sure to get out for a few minutes at one of the stations, and can then unlock the hamper and give them a bottle each. It would never do to leave it to their mercy; they would drink it up

in the first half-hour, and then likely enough quarrel and fight. For ourselves, we will have a small skin of water and, say, three bottles of whisky. The carriage is sure to be full, and it will be acceptable in the heat of the day to-morrow. The remainder of our supply of tea and so on, and the lamp and other things, had better all go in with the horses, and everything we do not absolutely want in the train with us; there will be little room enough. Get an extra kettle, then we can not only make ourselves a cup of tea or cocoa on the road, but give some to any friend we may make; besides, it is sure to come in useful when we get to the front."

"I will see to all that."

"If you will, take Jack with you to carry the things you buy."

"I had better take two of them; it will be a good weight."

"Very well, take one of the Zulus; the other can lead the spare horse, and likely enough we shall have some trouble in getting them into the waggon."

That work, however, turned out more easy than he had expected. The station-master pointed out the waggon that he was to take, which was standing alone on one of the lines of rails. They all set to work, and were not long in running it alongside an empty platform, from which the horses were led into it without trouble, being by this time accustomed to so many changes that they obeyed their masters' orders without hesitation. They had, too, already made one railway journey, and had found that it was not unpleasant. The station-master happened to catch sight of them, and sent two of the porters to take the waggon across the various points to the rear of the train, where it was coupled. The water-skins had been filled and the horses given a good drink before

entering the station, and the stores, waterproofs, and other spare articles stowed with the horses. The shutter was closed, and the Kaffirs told that on no account were they to open it or show their faces until the train had left the station.

In a few minutes Willesden came up with the two natives heavily laden. As soon as the stores and natives were all safely packed away and the door of the van locked by one of the porters, the lads went out and had a hearty meal at a hotel near the station. When they returned, a large number of soldiers and sailors were gathered on the platform. Their baggage had already been stowed, and they were drawn up in fours, facing the train, in readiness to enter when the word was given, the officers standing and chatting in groups. The station was well lighted, as, in addition to the ordinary gas-lamps, several powerful oil-lamps had been hung up at short intervals. The naval men were in the front part of the train, and on Chris walking up there the officer in command beckoned to him.

"I will take you in the carriage with me, Mr. King. We want very much to hear your story, and there is plenty of room for you. Your three companions will go in the next two compartments, which will contain junior officers and mid-shipmen, and I am sure that they too will be very welcome. Before we board the train I will get you all to go and sit at the windows at the other side. If you will bring your friends up I will introduce them to their messmates on the trip. As soon as we have all entered, we shall be at the window saying good-bye to our friends, and no one will catch sight of you. It is just as well, for although I feel perfectly justified in taking you on to make your report to the commander-in-

chief, my senior might fuss over it; and though he might let you go on, there would be a lot of explanations and bother. Have you got your horses in?"

"Yes, sir; we were able to manage that capitally."

"Then you had better bring your comrades up at once, Mr. King, and I will introduce them to those they will travel with."

Chris brought up his three friends and introduced them to the officer, who then took them to the group of youngsters.

"Gentlemen," he said, "these three gentlemen will travel in your compartment. They have seen a great deal of the war, and belong to one of the mounted volunteer corps. They have a wonderful story to tell you, and I am sure you will be delighted with their companionship. They will take their seats just before the men entrain. They must occupy the seats near the farther window, and as you will no doubt all be looking out on this side, they will probably not be noticed, which would be all the better, as it is a little irregular my taking them up."

By this time a considerable number of people were crowded in the station, friends of the officers and comrades of the sailors, who looked enviously at those going forward, while they themselves might possibly not get a chance of doing so. A quarter of an hour later the officer said:

"I am going to give the order to entrain. This is my compartment. You and your friends had better slip into your places at once."

As soon as they had got in the order was given, and with the regularity of a machine three hundred men entered the train. As soon as they had done so the officers took their

places. The crowd moved up on to the platform, and there was much shaking of hands, cheering, and exhortations to do for the Boers. Suddenly there was a backward movement on the part of the spectators, and the commanding naval officer on the station, with several others and a group of military men, came on to the platform. They were received by the officers in command of the sailors and soldiers, and walked with them along the platform talking. This was evidently a matter of ceremony only. The usual questions were put as to the stores, and after standing and chatting for eight or ten minutes the officers took their places in the train, the engine whistled, and the train moved on, amid loud cheering both from those on the platform and the men at the windows. As soon as they were fairly off, Chris's friend said:

"I have already introduced you to these officers, Mr. King, but have not told them any of your doings. I can only say, gentlemen, that this young officer is in command of a section of Volunteer Horse, and has done work that any of us might be proud indeed to accomplish. The best introduction I can give him, before he begins to tell his story, is by reading a letter with which General Yule has furnished him."

CHAPTER XI

BACK WITH THE ARMY

WHILE the letter was being passed round from hand to hand, a good deal to Chris's discomfort, he had time to look more closely than he had done before at his travelling

companions. Three of them were young lieutenants, the fourth an older man, shrewd but kindly faced. In introducing him, his friend said: "This is our medico, Dr. Dawlish. I hope that you will have no occasion to make his professional acquaintance." When they had all read the letter, the senior lieutenant said: "Now, Mr. King, we won't ask much of you to-night; we shall have all to-morrow to listen to your story. We have all had a pretty hard day's work, and shall before long turn in. Perhaps you will tell us, to begin with, what your corps is, and how you became the officer?"

"There are twenty-one of us, sir, and we are all about the same age. We were great friends together at Johannesburg, where our fathers were for the most part connected with mining. As things went on badly, we decided to form ourselves into a corps if the war broke out. They chose me as their leader—for no particular reason that I know of—and with the understanding that if I did not quite give satisfaction, I should resign in favour of one of the others. We all came down with our families from Johannesburg when war was declared, and were grossly insulted and ill-treated by the Boers, several of the ladies, among them my mother, being struck on the face with their whips, which, you can imagine, quite confirmed our determination to fight against them. We had all obtained our parents' consent, and when we got to Pietermaritzburg, proceeded to get our horses and equipments. That is all."

"A great deal too short, Mr. King," the lieutenant said. "We want to know what steps you took, and how you managed it. Did you come down all the way by train?"

Chris related the events of the journey with more detail,

and how, all being well furnished with money, they had lost no time in getting all they required, and going back by train to Newcastle.

"That is a good point to leave off," the officer said. "To-morrow morning we will take your story in instalments, and I do hope you will give us the details as minutely as you can. They will greatly interest us, as we are going in for that sort of thing, and it will show us what can be done by a small number of young fellows accustomed to the country, well-mounted, and, I am sure, from what General Yule says, remarkably well led."

All were provided with flasks, and after sampling the contents of these, they wrapped themselves in their rugs and were soon fast asleep. The other three lads did not get off so easily, the younger officers were all so delighted at the prospect of soon being engaged that they were in no way inclined to sleep, and it was not until the seniors had long been soundly off that they too agreed to postpone the rest of the boys' narrative until the next morning. The train travelled very slowly, and Pietermaritzburg—a distance of seventy miles—was not reached until day was breaking. Here there was a long pause, and all alighted to stretch their limbs. The lads ran to the end of the train; Jack was looking out.

"I thought that we should stop here, baas," he said; "and I have got the kettles boiling and ready."

"Good man!" Chris said. "How have the horses passed the night?"

"They have been very quiet, baas."

"That is good to know. Take the kettles off and put three good handfuls of tea in each."

"Yes, baas."

"When they are emptied, fill them with fresh water and put them again on the stove. When they boil, bring them to our carriages, having, of course, put some tea in before you take them off the lamp. Now, give me one of those large loaves and the ham, and all the mugs and knives. We will start breakfast first in my compartment, Willesden; we will pass you in the ham when we have done with it. Anyhow, the kettles will hold enough for a mug for everyone in our three compartments, and by the time we have drunk that the second lot will be boiling. Open a couple of tins of milk, Jack, and then you can bring them along when you have taken the kettles. There is no extraordinary hurry, for I heard them say that we should wait here at least an hour."

There was some amusement among the soldiers and sailors as Jack, carrying the kettles, and Chris, Willesden, Brown, and Peters with ham, bread and butter, tin mugs, plates, and three open tins of preserved milk, came along down the platform.

"What have you got here?" the doctor asked in surprise, as they arrived at the carriage.

"Breakfast," Chris said. "It is in the rough, but you will get it rougher than this before you get to Ladysmith."

"Why, you must be a conjurer. Where did you get the water from? We were just discussing whether we should go out and try to fight our way to those barrels of beer where the Tommies are clustered, or content ourselves with spirit and water, a drink I cannot recommend in the morning."

There were exclamations of pleasure from all in the carriage as Jack was handing in the things.

"We shall not want the ham, Mr. King," the senior lieutenant said. "We provided ourselves with a great basket of eatables and a few bottles of wine, but the idea of making tea in the train did not, I think, occur to any of us."

Chris was not allowed to cut his ham, for the basket contained pies, chicken, and other luxuries; but the tea was immensely appreciated. By the time that the first mugs were empty Jack arrived with the fresh supply, and long before the train started breakfast was over, pipes had been lighted, and all felt thoroughly awake and cheery.

"Do you always travel so well provided, Mr. King?" the doctor asked.

"We always carry tea, preserved milk, and preserved cocoa, and two or three gallons of paraffin for cooking with. In case we can't find wood for a fire, it makes all the difference in the world in our comfort."

"Now, Mr. King, we must waste no more time; so please begin at once, or there will be no time to hear all your story. Tell us something about your expedition to Komatipoort. The other we shall hope to hear on another occasion in our camp, where we shall all be glad to see you at any time."

Chris then related the idea he had formed at Maritzburg, of blowing up the bridge, and how he had carried out the adventure. He passed very briefly over the journey, but described fully how they had been obliged to relinquish their original project, owing to the bridge being so strongly guarded at both ends; and how, failing in that respect, they had determined to do as much damage as possible to the great assemblage of waggons filled with arms and military

stores; and fully detailed the manner in which this had been accomplished, and the aspect of the yard on the following morning.

"Splendidly planned and carried out!" the commander of the party exclaimed, and the others all echoed his words. It was astonishing indeed to think that such a plan should have been conceived and carried out by a lad no older than some of their junior midshipmen, and assisted by only three others of the same age.

"The day before we started," the doctor said, "I saw in one of the Durban papers a telegram from Lorenzo Marques saying that there had been an explosion at Komati-poort, where a few waggons had been injured and two natives killed, but that no Boers had suffered in any way, and that the damage would be repaired and the line opened for traffic in a few hours."

"There is only one word of truth in that, sir," Chris said, smiling, "and that is that no Boers suffered. I am convinced that is strictly true, for the eight Boers at the bridge were certainly instantaneously killed; and of the natives, whom I am sorry for, there were certainly eighteen killed, together with some eight or ten Portuguese employés. If I could by any possibility have got the natives out of the way I would have done so. As to the Portuguese, I do not feel any great regret, for I believe all the officials in the custom-house on the railway are bribed by the Boers to break the official orders they receive as to observing strict neutrality, and aid in every way in passing the materials of war into the Transvaal."

There was no time for further conversation, for they were

now within a short distance of the Tugela, and the train was winding its way between steep hills which could have been held successfully by a handful of men.

"The only wonder to me is," another officer said, "that the Boers did not take up and drag away the rails all the way from here to Estcourt. If they had lifted them out of their sleepers, they had only to harness a rail behind each horse and trot off with it. I know that there is a considerable amount of railway material at Durban, but I doubt if there is anything like sufficient to make twenty miles of road. And the business would have been still more difficult if the Boers had collected the sleepers in great piles and burned them. Of course they have destroyed a good many culverts, and the bridge at Estcourt. It is wonderful that the railway people should have managed to get up a temporary trestle bridge so soon, and to make a deviation of the line to carry the trains over. It does their engineers immense credit. This pass is widening," he added after putting his head out of the window. "I fancy we shall be at Chieveley in a few minutes."

The train came to a stand-still at a siding a short distance outside the station, which was crowded by a long line of waggons with stores of all kinds. A number of sailors were unloading shell for their guns, and a crowd of Kaffirs, under the orders of military officers, were getting out the stores. As they alighted, after hearty thanks to the officer whose kindness had been the means of their getting forward so promptly, and who now went to report his arrival to Captain Jones, who was superintending the operations of the sailors, Chris and his party hurried to the rear waggon. It was a work of considerable difficulty to get the horses out, and could not have been accom-

plished had there not been a stack of sleepers near the spot. A number of these were carried and piled so as to make a sloping gangway, by which the horses were brought down. The sleepers being returned to their places, Chris and his friends mounted and rode to the camp, which was placed behind a long, low ridge which screened it from the sight of the enemy on the opposite hills, although within easy range of their heavy guns.

Here before daybreak on the 12th, Major-General Barton's Fusilier brigade, with a thousand Colonial Cavalry, three field-batteries, and the naval guns, had marched north, and were the following night joined by another brigade with some cavalry. The next day the big naval guns had opened fire; but although their shell had reached the lower entrenchments of the Boers, their batteries on the hill had proved to be beyond their range even with the greatest elevation that could be given to them, while the Boer guns carried far beyond the camp.

Chris had learned at Estcourt, where the train stopped a few minutes, that Captain Brookfield's troop formed part of the Colonial Horse that had advanced with General Barton's brigade, and they soon discovered their position. Leaving the horses with the natives, they went to his tent.

"I am delighted to see you back," he exclaimed as they entered. "I heard in confidence from one of your party, when they joined me a week back, that you had gone on a mad-brained adventure to try and blow up the Komati-poort bridge. I was horrified! I had, of course, given you leave to act on your own responsibility, but I never dreamt of your undertaking an expedition of that sort. Of course you found it impossible to get there. A lad told me that you had

reckoned on being away six or seven weeks, and it is less than a month since the date on which he told me you left. Anyhow, I heartily congratulate you on all getting back."

"We got there, sir, but nothing could be done with the bridge, it was so safely guarded. However, we did blow up two big cannon and a battery of small ones, some ten thousand rifles, and an enormous quantity of ammunition."

"You don't say so, Chris? Then you had better luck than you deserved. One of the correspondents told me this morning that there was news in the town by a telegram from Lorenzo Marques that there had been an accidental explosion at Komati-poort, but it did not seem to be anything serious. Tell me all about it."

"I congratulate you most heartily," he said, when Chris had finished the story. "Of course you have written a report of it?"

"Here it is, sir. I have made it very brief, merely saying that I had the honour to report that, with Messrs. Peters, Brown, and Willesden, I succeeded in blowing up, with two hundredweight of dynamite, the things I have mentioned to you, destroying a large quantity of rolling stock, badly damaging five locomotives, and destroying roads and sidings to such an extent that traffic can hardly be resumed for a fortnight. Is the general here, sir?"

"No, but he will be here this afternoon. Now, I will not detain you from your friends. No doubt they saw you ride in, and will be most anxious to hear of your doings. You will hardly know them again. When they came up to join us they adopted the uniform of the corps, feeling that it would be uncomfortable going about in a large camp in

civilian dress. They brought with them uniforms for you all, for they seemed very certain that you would return alive."

"I am very glad of that, sir, for the soldiers all stared at us as we came up here. I suppose they took us for sight-seers who had come up to witness the battle."

As they left the tent they found the rest of their party, gathered in a group twenty yards away, and the heartiest greeting was exchanged. The delight of the party knew no bounds when they found that their four friends had not had their journey in vain. They had two tents between them, and gathering in one of them they listened to Peters, who told the story, as Chris said he had told it twice, and should probably have to tell it again. The four lads at once exchanged their civilian clothes for the uniforms that had been brought up. They were, like those of the other Colonial corps, very simple, consisting of a loose jacket reaching down to the hip, with turned-down collar and pockets; breeches of the same light colour and material, loose to the knee and tighter below it; knee-boots, and felt hats looped up on one side.

The first step when they were dressed was to mount an eminence some distance in rear of the camp, whence they had a view of the whole country. In front of them was a wide valley with a broad river running through it. Beyond it rose steep hills, range behind range. It was crossed by two bridges, that of the railway, which had been blown up and destroyed, and the road bridge, which was still intact; though, as Sankey, who had accompanied them, told them, it was known to be mined. To the left of the line of railway was a hill known as Grobler's Kloof, on the summit of which a line of heavy guns could be seen. There were

other batteries on slopes at its foot commanding the bridge, to the right of which, on another hill, was Fort Wylie, and in a bend of the river by the railway could be seen the white roof of the church tower of Colenso. There was another battery behind this, and others still farther to the right on Mount Hlangwane. Heavy guns could be seen on other hills to the left of Grobler's Kloof; while far away behind Colenso was the crest of Mount Bulwana, from which a cannonade was being directed upon Ladysmith, and an occasional white burst of smoke showed that the garrison were replying successfully. On all the lower slopes of the hills were lines, sometimes broken, sometimes connected, rising one above another. These were the Boer entrenchments, and Cairns said that he heard that they extended for nearly twenty miles both to the right and left.

"It is believed that we don't see anything like all of them," he went on, "but we really don't know much about them, for the Boers only answer occasionally from their great guns on the hilltops, and although yesterday the sailors fired lyddite shells at those lower trenches, there was no reply."

"It is an awful place to take," Chris said, after examining the hills for a quarter of an hour with his glasses. "We have seen that the Boers are no good in the open, but I have no doubt they will hold their entrenchments stubbornly, and it is certain that a great many of them are good shots. I have gone over the ground at Laing's Nek, and that was nothing at all in comparison to this position. Do you know how many there are supposed to be of them, Cairns?"

"They say that there are about twenty-five thousand of them, but no one knows exactly. Natives get through pretty

often from Ladysmith, but they know no more there than we do here. They are all jolly and cheerful there, in the thought that they will soon be relieved."

"I hope that they are not counting their chickens before they are hatched," Chris said. "I doubt very greatly whether we shall carry those hills in front of us, and if we do, the ranges behind are no doubt fortified. How about crossing the river?"

"There are several drifts. There is one about four miles to the left of the bridge, called Bridle Drift. Waggon Drift is about as much farther on. There is a drift just this side of where the Little Tugela runs into it, and one just farther on; there is Skeete Drift and Molen Drift, with a pontoon ferry; there is an important one called Potgieter's Drift, where the road from Springfield to Ladysmith crosses; and another, Trichardt's, where a road goes to Acton Homes. I know there are some to the right, but I don't know their names."

"Well, that is comforting, because even if we take Colenso there would be no crossing if the bridge is mined. And as the town will be commanded by a dozen batteries, we should not gain much by its capture. Well, I tell you fairly that I am well satisfied that we belong to a mounted corps, and shall be only lookers-on, for even if we win we shall certainly lose a tremendous lot of men. Is there no way of marching round one way or the other?"

"I believe not. The only way at all open seems to be round by Acton Homes; that is a place about fifteen miles west of Ladysmith, and on the principal road from Van Reenen's Pass. From there down to Ladysmith the country

is comparatively open, but it is a tremendously long way round. I don't know how far, but I should say forty or fifty miles; and certainly the road will in many places be commanded by Boer guns; and they will most likely have fortified strong positions at various points. But, of course, the great difficulty will be transport; I am sure we have nothing like enough to take stores for the army all that distance. Besides, Chris, I don't see that we should gain any advantage from going to Ladysmith that way, we should be as far as ever from thrashing the Boers, and certainly could not remain in Ladysmith; we should eat up all the provisions there in no time."

"I don't like the outlook at all," Peters said.

"Ah! there is a general officer with a staff riding into the camp. Most likely it is Buller. We had better go down, for if Brookfield gives in my report he may want to speak to me."

The party went down the hill. When they reached their camp they were at once sent for to Captain Brookfield's tent.

"I am glad that you are back," he said. "Sir Redvers Buller has just ridden up on to the ridge. I will speak to him as he comes down. You had better come with me and stand a short distance off. Bring your rifles with you, and stand in military order; you three in line, and Chris two paces in front of you."

Having got their rifles they followed Captain Brookfield till he stopped at the foot of the slope below the point where the general and his staff were standing. Their leader advanced some fifty yards ahead of them. In a quarter of an hour the party were seen descending the hill. Captain Brookfield stepped forward and saluted the general as he came along a horse's

length in front of his staff. Sir Redvers checked his horse a little impatiently.

"What is it sir?" he said sharply. "I cannot attend to camp details now."

"I command the Maritzburg Scouts," Captain Brookfield said. "Three of my men, with Mr. King, who commands the section to which they belong, have just returned. I wish to hand you Mr. King's report; it contains news which is, I think, of importance."

"Give it to Lord Gerard," the general said briefly, motioning to one of the officers behind him. "Please see what it is about, Gerard." And he then moved forward again, briefly acknowledging Captain Brookfield's salute. He had gone, however, but twenty yards when Lord Gerard rode up to him and handed to him the open despatch.

"It is of importance, sir."

Supposing that it was merely the report of four scouts who had gone out reconnoitring, and with his mind absorbed with weightier matters, the general had hardly given the matter a thought. Without checking his horse he glanced at the paper, and then abruptly reined in his charger and read it through attentively. Then he turned to where Captain Brookfield was still standing, and called him up.

"I do not quite understand this report, sir," he said. "Is it possible that your men have been up to Komati-poort? I gathered from your words that they had merely returned from reconnoitring."

"No, sir; they only came in this morning by the train from Durban with the naval detachment with details."

"But how in the world did they get to Komati-poort?"

"They started from Maritzburg, sir, and rode up through Zululand and Swaziland. Their object was to blow up the bridge, and to stop supplies of munitions of war continuing to pass up through Lorenzo Marques. I may say that they acted on their own initiative. The section to which they belong is composed entirely of gentlemen's sons from Johannesburg; they provide their own horses and equipment, and draw no pay or rations, and when they joined my corps made it a condition that so long as not required for regular work they should be allowed to scout on their own account."

Before calling up Captain Brookfield the general had handed back the despatch to Lord Gerard, with the words, "Pass it round."

"Are those your men?" the general said, pointing to the little squad.

"Yes, sir."

Sir Redvers rode up to them, and on returning their salute, said: "You have done well indeed, gentlemen; it was a most gallant action. Have you your horse with you?" he asked Chris.

"Yes, sir."

"Then mount at once and join me as I leave camp. Then you can tell me about this matter on my way back."

Chris was soon on horseback. He waited at a short distance while the general talked with General Barton, and as soon as he saw him turn to ride off cantered up and joined the staff. The general looked round as he did so. He beckoned to him to come up to his side.

"Now, sir, let me hear more about this. The captain of the troop that you belong to, tells me that you and twenty other young fellows, all from Johannesburg, formed your-

selves into a party of scouts, and are making war at your own expense, and that although in a certain way you joined his troop you really act independently when it so pleases you."

"Yes, sir. We and our families have received great indignities from the Boers; and although we are conscious that we should be of little use as troops, we thought that we could do service as scouts on our own account, and have been lucky in inflicting some blows on them. I was fortunate enough to attract General Yule's attention at Dundee, and he furnished me with an open letter addressed to you, and to officers commanding stations, saying that we had done so."

"Have you it about you?"

"Yes, sir."

Sir Redvers held out his hand, and Chris handed him the letter. "So you went into the Boer camp! Do you speak Dutch well?"

"Yes, sir; we all speak Dutch fairly, and most of us Kaffir also, that was why we thought that we should be more useful scouting; until now we have all been dressed as young Boers, and could, I think, pass without suspicion anywhere."

"Now as to this other affair," Sir Redvers said, returning Colonel Yule's letter. "You had better take this, it will be useful to you another time. Now tell me all about it. Was it entirely your own idea?"

"I first thought of it, sir, and my three friends agreed to go with me. I did not want a larger number. We started from Maritzburg with our own Kaffir servant, and two Zulus and two Swazis to act as guides, two ponies, each of which carried a hundredweight of dynamite; we had also a spare riding horse."

He then related their proceedings from the time of their start to their arrival at Komati-poort; their failure at the bridge in consequence of the strong guard that the Boers had set over it; and how, finding that the main object of their journey could not be carried out, they proceeded to wreck the station yard and its contents.

"Thank you, Mr. King!" the general said, when Chris concluded by mentioning briefly how they had ridden down to Lorenzo Marques, and taken a ship to Durban, and come up by train. "I saw the telegram of the accident at Komati-poort. I imagined that it was probably more severe than was stated, but certainly had no idea that such wholesale damage had been effected, or that it was the work of any of our people. I think that it would be unwise for me to take any public notice of it at present; possibly there may be another attempt made to destroy that bridge. If nothing more is said about it, the Boers may in time cease to be careful, and a few determined men landed at Lorenzo Marques may manage to succeed where you were unable to do so. It would be worth any money to us to put a stop to the constant flow of arms and ammunition that is going on via Lorenzo Marques. I consider your expedition to have been in the highest degree praiseworthy, and to have been conducted with great skill."

"My father is a mining engineer, and managing-director of several mines round Johannesburg, general. I have been working there under him and learning the business, and therefore know a good deal about dynamite, and what a certain quantity would effect."

"Have you thought of going into the army? because if so, I will appoint you and your three friends to regiments at

once, and you will be gazetted as soon as my report goes home."

"I am very much obliged to you, general, but I have no thought of entering the army. I will, of course, mention it to my friends. I have never heard them say anything on the subject. We are fighting because we hate the Boers. No one can say, unless he has been resident there, what we have all had to put up with, for the past year especially. On the way down the Boers not only threatened to strike us, but struck many of the ladies, my mother among them, besides robbing everyone of watches and all other valuables. If it had not been for that, some of us might have changed our minds before we got down here. That settled the matter. And besides, sir, I hope that we shall be able to do more good in our own way than if we became regular officers, as we know nothing about drill and should be of very little good, whereas we do understand our own way of fighting. I can say so without boasting, for we have twice thrashed the Boers; once when they were twice our number, and the other time when they were nearly four times as strong as we were."

"Go on doing so, Mr. King; go on doing so, you cannot do better. However, if any of your three friends, or all of them, choose to accept my offer, it is open to them."

They were by this time close to Frere, and the general went on: "I am sorry that I cannot ask you to dine with me this evening, as we shall all be too busy for anything like a regular meal, for in a few hours there will be a general advance. Good-evening! When I am less busy I shall be glad to hear about those two fights that you speak of. You colonists have taught us a few lessons already."

Chris saluted, wheeled his horse round, and cantered back to Chieveley. There was much satisfaction among the whole of the party when Chris related what General Buller had said. None of his three companions had any desire to accept a commission. Willesden's father was a doctor with a large practice in Johannesburg, and the lad himself was going home after the war was over, to study for the profession and to take his medical degree; while Brown and Peters were both sons of very wealthy capitalists.

. "If I could not have done any fighting any other way I should have liked a commission very much. Of course I could have thrown it up at the end of the war. But I would a great deal rather be on horseback than on foot, and I own I have no inclination to fight my way across those hills. Talana was a pretty serious business, but it was child's play to what this will be."

"Very well," Chris said; "I did not think that any of you would care for it, although I could not answer for you. There is no need for hurry in sending in a reply; there will be time to do that when we get into Ladysmith. Then I will get Captain Brookfield to draw up the kind of letter that ought to be sent, for I have not the least idea how I should address a commander-in-chief. Of course, a thing of this sort ought to be done in a formal sort of way; I could not very well say, 'My dear general, my three friends don't care to accept your kind offer. Yours very truly.'"

There was a general laugh, and then they talked over the coming fight, for it was now generally known that the attack was to be made in a couple of days at latest. The next morning General Buller's column started before daybreak, and were by

nine o'clock encamped on the open veldt three miles north of Chieveley; Barton's brigade having already marched out to the site of a new camp, some five thousand yards south of Colenso. Although well within reach of their guns, the Boers made no effort to hinder the operation, or to shell the camp after it was formed. It was evidently their policy to conceal their guns until the last moment, and although a very heavy bombardment of their positions was maintained all day by the naval guns, no reply whatever was elicited, though through the glasses it could be seen that much damage was being done to the entrenchments.

"I don't like this silence," Chris said, as he and some of the others were standing watching the hills in front of them. "It does not seem natural, when you are being pelted like that, not to shy something back. I am afraid it will be a terribly hot business when they do open fire to-morrow."

There had been a discussion that morning whether the four natives Chris had engaged for his expedition should be taken on permanently, and they unanimously agreed that they should be. It was quite possible that all the colonial corps would at some time be called upon to act as infantry, and it would be a good thing to have six men to look after the twenty-five horses while they were away. Then, too, it would be very handy to have a stretcher party of their own. On the question being put to them, the four men had willingly agreed to follow the party whenever they went into a fight, to take two stretchers with which they could at once carry any who might be wounded back to camp. They were all strong fellows belonging to fighting peoples, and would, the boys had no doubt, show as much courage as the Indian

bearers had displayed at Dundee and Elandslaagte. In the evening Captain Brookfield sent for Chris.

"The orders for to-morrow are out," he said, "as far as we are concerned. A thousand mounted infantry and one battery are to move in the direction of Hlangwane—that is the hill, you know, this side of the river to the right of Colenso. We shall cover the right flank of the general movement and endeavour to take up a position on the hill, where the battery will pepper the Boers on the kopjes north of the bridge. Two mounted troops of three and five hundred men will cover the right and left flanks respectively and protect the baggage. Half my troop are to accompany Dundonald, the other half will form a part of the force guarding the left wing. Your party will be with this force. You have had your share of fighting, and none of the others have yet had a chance."

"Very well, sir, I shall not be sorry to be on this duty; for naturally we shall have a good view of the whole fight, while if we were engaged we should see nothing except what was going on close to us."

"Yes, it will be something to see, Chris, and something to hear, for I doubt whether there has been so heavy a fire as that which will be kept up to-morrow, ever since war began. We have some twenty-three thousand men, and the Boers more than as many, and what with magazine-guns, machine-guns, and fast-firing cannon of all sizes, it will be an inferno."

CHAPTER XII

THE BATTLE OF COLENSO

BY daybreak next morning the whole force was under arms. General Hildyard in the centre was to attack the iron bridge at Colenso. General Hart's Irish brigade was to march towards Bridle Drift, and after crossing to move along the left bank of the river towards the kopjes north of the iron bridge. General Barton was to move forward east of the railway towards Hlangwane Hill, and to support General Hildyard, or the Colonial troops moving against that hill, as might appear necessary, while General Lyttleton's brigade, half-way between those of Hildyard and Hart, were to be prepared to render assistance to either as might be required. One division of the artillery was to follow Lyttleton's brigade. The six naval guns were to advance on his right. The sixth brigade were to aid General Hart, and three batteries of Royal Artillery to move east of the railway, under cover of the sixth brigade, to a point from which they could prepare the way for Hildyard's brigade to cross the bridge.

The action began before six o'clock, the naval guns opening with lyddite on the trenches on Grobler's Hill, and those between it and Fort Wylie. No reply whatever was made by the Boers, and the troopers standing by their horses' heads in readiness to mount should any party of Boers make a raid on the camp, began to wonder whether the enemy had not retreated. Hildyard's men advanced in open order close to the railway; the Queen's Own, with the West York in support, on the right of the railway; and the Devons, with East Surrey

behind them, on the left. They marched as steadily and in as perfect alignment as if on parade, eight paces apart. Hart's Irish brigade, far away to the left, were in close order. The cavalry could be seen proceeding at a trot towards Hlangwane, General Barton's brigade still bearing to the east; and Colonel Long and Colonel Hunt with their batteries, without waiting for their protection, galloped straight forward, and, taking up a position almost facing Fort Wylie, a few hundred yards beyond the river, opened a heavy fire; the six naval guns, which were drawn by bullocks, being still a considerable distance behind them.

Still the Boer guns remained silent. But at half-past six their musketry opened suddenly upon the Queen's Own, the Devons, and the guns, in one continuous roar. It came not only from the entrenchments on the face of the hill, but from trenches close down by the river, and from the houses of Colenso, from some railway huts, and from the bushes that fringed the south bank of the river, which had been believed to be wholly unoccupied. Five minutes later their cannon joined in the roar, with machine-guns, one-pounder Maxims, and the great Creusots and Krupps. And yet through this storm of lead and iron our soldiers went on quietly and steadily. The very ground round them was torn up by bullet and ball. Many fell, but there was no flinching; while on their right, Long's batteries, though swept by a hail of missiles from unseen foes, maintained a continuous fire at Fort Wylie.

"It is awful!" Peters exclaimed as he lowered his glasses. "I thought it would be dreadful, but I never dreamt of anything like this. Look at the bodies dotting the ground our

men are passing over, and yet the others go on as if it was a shower of rain through which they were passing. I can't look at it any longer."

"It is as bad for the artillery," Chris said, with his glasses still riveted upon them. "I saw a lot of the horses go down before they were unlimbered, and I can see the men are falling fast. Surely they can never have been meant to go within five or six hundred yards of magazine-rifles. I thought everyone had agreed that artillery could not live within range of breech-loaders. Why doesn't Barton's brigade move down towards them, and try and keep down the fire? How is Hart getting on?"

But it was not easy to see this even with glasses. They had not become engaged until a little later than the others, but as they approached the river an equally terrible fire opened upon them. Being in comparatively close order, they suffered more heavily than Hildyard had done. Presently they came upon a spruit which they took to be the main river, and under a tremendous fire from the Mausers and guns, dashed across it, and swinging round their left made for the drift, sweeping before them a number of Boers who had been hidden in the long grass. Trenches were there line after line, but over these the four regiments — the Connaught Rangers, the Border regiment, the Inniskillings, and Dublin Fusiliers—dashed forward with such fury that the Boers did not stop to meet their bayonets. By a quarter-past seven the enemy had been driven across the Tugela. Without hesitation the Irish dashed into the river. Many fell headlong, for along the bottom barbed wires had been stretched. Worse still, it was found that instead of being two feet deep, as was expected, it was eight

feet; for the Boers had erected a dyke across the river a little lower down, and had dammed the water back.

Some swam across with their rifles and ammunition, but it was a feat beyond all except the strongest swimmers, and after maintaining themselves for some time they were forced to retire. The naval guns did their best to assist them, and silenced some of the Boer cannon that were pounding them, but they failed to draw the Boer fire upon themselves. It was only in the centre that even partial success was gained. Hildyard's men had reached but not captured Colenso bridge. In spite of the tremendous fire, some of the soldiers tried to make their way along it, but were recalled; for they were deprived of the support of the artillery that should have covered their passage, had no hope of Hart bringing his brigade round to clear the enemy out from the kloofs on the opposite side, and but little of aid from Lyttleton, who had been obliged to move farther to the left to lend assistance to Hart. Some of the Scottish Fusiliers had joined them from Barton's brigade, but the brigade itself was far away.

Terrible as the fighting was at all points, it was the batteries down by the river that most engaged the attention of the anxious spectators. Desperate attempts were being made to get the guns back. Almost all the horses had been killed, but the drivers of the teams of the ammunition waggons, the few survivors of the officers, and several of the general's staff dashed recklessly forward under a hail of fire. Horse and man went over, but two of the guns were carried off. Fortunately, the naval battery and the third field-battery had not been taken so far forward, and were withdrawn with comparatively little loss; and the ten guns stood alone and deserted by

the last of the party as it seemed. Then, to the surprise of the watchers, one of them spoke out, for four of the men who worked it had stood to their charge to the last. Again and again it sent its shrapnel among the Boer trenches. One fell and then another, but two remained. They continued to fire until the last round of reserve ammunition was finished. Then those who were near enough to make out their figures saw them take their stand, one on each side of the gun, at attention, until both fell dead by the side of the piece they had served so well. Even on the right, where success might really have been hoped for, everything had gone badly. The dismounted Colonials had fought their way gallantly up the slopes of the Hlangwane, and nearly reached the crest. But they were not seconded by Lord Dundonald's cavalry; Barton's brigade, which was charged with aiding them, were kept at a distance, and the Colonials were at last forced to fall back.

Great as was the loss at other points, the failure to capture this hill was really the greatest misfortune of the day. From its position on the south of the river, and in a loop, batteries erected on its summit would have taken all the Boer defences on the lower slopes of the hills in flank, and it would have covered the crossing of the river at Colenso. Cut off by the river from the rest of the Boer position it could hardly have been retaken, and its fire would have searched the valley up which the roadway ran almost as far as Mount Bulwana.

Renewed attempts were made for some time to carry off the guns, but early in the afternoon the general saw that it was but a waste of life to persevere further, and orders were despatched for the troops to retire. It had been a day of

misfortunes, and yet a day of glory, for never had the fighting power of British troops been more splendidly exhibited, never were greater deeds of individual daring performed; never had troops supported with heroic indifference so terrible a fire. Undoubtedly the English general had greatly underrated the fighting powers of the Boers and the amount of artillery to which he was exposed. Had he not done so, he would scarcely have distributed his force over so wide a face, or attacked at three points nearly four miles apart, but would have prepared for the grand assault by seizing Hlangwane and firmly establishing some of his batteries there, even at the cost of two or three days' labour, and only attempted to cross the river when the movement would have been covered by their fire.

The Boers were quick in discovering the importance of the hill, and speedily covered its face with such entrenchments, that not until after long weeks of effort and failure was an attack again attempted against it; and the success of that attack opened the way to Ladysmith. But had the general's orders been carried out at all points it would probably have been captured. Hart's brigade was to have begun the attack, but owing to the map with which he was furnished being defective, his troops losing their way in the spruit, and their being led in far too close a formation under the enemy's fire, its attempt failed; this being, however, largely due to the astuteness of the Boers in damming back the river and rendering the ford impracticable. The impetuosity of the officers commanding two of the batteries of artillery, in pushing their guns forward unattended by infantry as ordered, not only caused the loss of ten guns and of nearly all the men who

worked them, but deprived Hildyard's column of the protection they would have had in crossing the bridge, and rendered the undertaking impossible; while the failure of Barton's brigade to give assistance either to Hildyard or to the assailants of Hlangwane, contributed to the one failure, and entirely brought about the other.

General Buller and General Clery had been wherever the shots were flying the thickest. Three of the former's staff, Captains Schofield and Congreve, and Lieutenant Roberts, son of Lord Roberts, had ridden forward as volunteers to try and get the guns off. Roberts was fatally wounded, Congreve was wounded and taken prisoner, and Schofield alone escaped unharmed with the two guns that were saved.

The day had been almost more terrible for the troops who remained unoccupied near the baggage than for those actually engaged in the terrible fight. The latter, animated by excitement and anger at their inability to get at the foe, had scarce time to think of their danger, and even laughed and joked in the midst of the hail of bullets, but the watchers had nothing to distract them during the long hours. With their glasses they could plainly see that no advance had been made at any point. To them it seemed incredible that any could come back from that storm of fire. From time to time they learned from wounded men brought up by the bearers, who fearlessly went down into the thick of the fire to do their duty, news of how matters were going on in the front.

Gladly, had they received orders to do so, would they have dashed down to try and carry off the guns. Many shed tears of rage as they heard how the Irish strove in vain to cross the deep river, and how many were drowned in their attempts

to swim it. They expected, when in the afternoon the troops came in, that they would see an utterly dispirited body of men, and were surprised when the Irish, who were the first to return to camp, marched along smoking their pipes and joking as if they had returned from a day of triumph rather than of failure. They were animated by a knowledge that they had done all that men could do, had proved they were worthy successors of their countrymen who had won glory in so many hard-fought fields, and that no shadow of reproach could fall upon them for their share in the day's work. Although they had suffered far more heavily than the other brigade, they returned more cheerfully. And yet there was no depression anywhere evinced, although there was anger, fierce anger, that they had not been able to get at the enemy, and a grim determination that next time they met, things should go differently.

A good many prisoners had been lost. Parties had spread along among the bushes that lined the river, and maintained a steady fire against the Boer entrenchments facing them. Some of these had not heard the bugle sounding the retire. When they were aware what was being done some had left their shelter and rushed across the open ground to join the columns, the majority being shot down as they did so. Others had waited among the bushes, intending to try after nightfall; but as soon as we fell back the Boers had again crossed the river and spread along its banks, and had thus made prisoners those who were in hiding there or in the little dongas. Among those so captured were fourteen of the Devons and as many gunners, with Colonel Hunt, Colonel Bullock, Major Mac-Walter, and Captains Goodwin, Vigors, and Congreve; the

total loss in killed, wounded, and prisoners amounted to about one thousand five hundred, of whom nearly half belonged to the Irish brigade. That evening the search-light, which had been placed on a lofty hill visible from one of the high kopjes held by the garrison of Ladysmith, flashed the news that the attack had failed, and that the garrison must be prepared to hold out for some time yet.

The news of the reverse created a tremendous sensation throughout Natal, where it had been confidently anticipated that the army would brush aside without difficulty the opposition of the Boers, relieve Ladysmith, and, advancing, sweep the invaders out of the colony. In England, too, the sensation was scarcely less pronounced, and for the first time the gravity of the war in which we were engaged was recognized. Hitherto it had been thought that fifty thousand men would suffice to bring it to a successful conclusion; now it was perceived that at least double that number would be required. The offers of the colonies to aid the mother country with troops had hitherto been coldly received, but these were now accepted thankfully, and although our military authorities would not as yet recognize that the volunteers could be relied upon as a real fighting force, there was a talk that some of the militia regiments might be embodied, and a large number of reservists were at once summoned back to the ranks.

At the front matters went on as before. It was now known how it was that the guns had advanced so far. Colonel Long had sent forward some of his mounted men with two officers. The Boers allowed them to approach the river bank without firing a shot. One of the scouts actually rode across the bridge to the other side, and, returning to the battery, they reported

that there were no Boers about, and it was only after receiving this message that Colonel Long took the guns forward to within six hundred yards of the river, and twelve hundred of Fort Wylie.

The wounded were all taken to Frere or Estcourt, where hospitals had been prepared. Hart and Lyttleton's brigades were sent back to Frere, and the camp at Chieveley was moved nearer to the station, both for convenience of supply, and because the position now taken up was a more defensible one, and was less exposed to the fire of the big Boer guns; large numbers of transport animals and waggons were brought up-country. It was known that a newly-landed division under General Sir Charles Warren was now coming up, one regiment, the Somersets, arrived in camp two or three days after the battle, and the loss of the cannon was to some extent retrieved by the arrival of a 50-lb. howitzer battery.

It was but dull work in camp. The more impetuous spirits were longing to be employed in annoying the Boers by frequent surprises at night; but as these could have achieved no permanent advantage, and must have been attended with considerable loss of life, Sir Redvers Buller set his face against any such attacks, and went steadily on with his preparations. As troops came up anticipations of a certain success when the next forward movement was made were generally entertained. Chris and his companions passed the time pleasantly enough. Being old friends they had plenty to talk about, and occasional scouting expeditions to the east gave them a certain amount of employment. Not having been engaged in the attack on Hlangwane, they did not participate in the soreness felt by the rest of the colonials at their failure to capture the hill, owing

to the want of support from Lord Dundonald's cavalry or Barton's brigade.

The chagrin felt at the mistake that had been made in not making this the prime object of attack was general, for the Boers could be seen working unceasingly at their entrenchments. They had not only made a ford by throwing great quantities of rock and stones into the channel, but had also built a bridge, so that the force on the hill could be speedily reinforced to any extent, and what could have been effected on the day of the attack by half a battalion of infantry would now be a very serious undertaking even by a whole division.

The lads were chatting one day over the chances of the next fight, most of them taking a very sanguine view.

"What do you say, Chris?" one of them said after the discussion had gone on for some time. "You have not given us your opinion."

"My opinion does not agree with yours," Chris replied. "After what I saw the other day, I think the difficulties of fighting our way over those mountains are so enormous that I doubt whether we shall ever do it."

There was a chorus of dissent.

"Well, we shall see," he said. "I hope that we shall do it just as much as you do, but it is a tremendous business. I have no doubt Sir Redvers will go on trying, but I should not be surprised if at heart he has doubts that it can be done. The Boers have more guns than we have, and any number of those Maxims and Hotchkiss that keep up a stream of balls. The Boers' trenches enable them to fire at us without showing anything but a head, except when they stand up or have to move across the open. If we drive them out of one

position they have others to fall back upon. It is not one natural fortress that we have to take, but a dozen of them. They know every foot of the country they occupy, while we know nothing but just what we can see at a distance."

"Well, if Sir Redvers thought as you do, why should he go on hammering at it?"

"For several reasons, Peters. In the first place, if Ladysmith saw that there was no chance of rescue it would at last give in; and in the second place, if there was an end of all attempts to relieve the place England would go wild with indignation; and in the third place, and by far the most important, Sir Redvers knows that he is keeping from twenty-five thousand to thirty thousand of the Boers inactive here, and so relieving the pressure on our troops on the other side. We know regiments are arriving from England at the Cape every day. When they get strong enough to invade the Orange Free State and take Bloemfontein, and march north, the Boers here will be hurrying away to defend their homes. Of course the Free Staters will go first, but the Transvaalers will have to follow. We hear that Methuen has been beaten at Magersfontein, and that he has been brought to a stand-still within the sound of the guns round Kimberley, just as we are here, and that the Boers have a very strong position there also. So at present the advance is as much checked there as it is here. Gatacre has had a misfortune too, so that we are all in the same boat. I saw a Pietermaritzburg paper in the naval camp just now; there are about twenty thousand men on the sea at the present moment, besides those in the colony, and two more divisions are being formed. So it is safe to come right in the long run. But at present, if those twenty-five

thousand Boers opposite to us were not there now, they would be riding all over Cape Colony, and if Buller were not to keep on hammering away here a good many of them would be off at once. They say Ladysmith can hold out for another three months. By that time there ought to be such a big force in the Orange State that the Boers won't dare to stop here any longer, and no end of loss of life will be avoided.

"I never thought that you were a croaker before," Field said, "except just before the last fight; but certainly things have gone very badly lately. Three disasters in seven or eight days are a facer; but I cannot think that we shall not succeed next time. When Warren's division is up Buller will have over thirty thousand men with him, in spite of our losses the other day, and we ought to be able to do it with that."

"Well, we shall see, Field. I hope you are right."

The news of Methuen's repulse and the terrible losses in the Highland brigade, and of Gatacre's disaster, cast a greater gloom over Buller's army than their own failure had done. The one topic of conversation among the officers was, what would be the feeling in England, and whether there would be any inclination to patch up another dishonourable peace like that after Majuba. But the feeling wore off as day after day the news came that the misfortunes had but raised the spirit and determination of the people of Great Britain to carry the war through to the bitter end; that recruiting was going on with extraordinary rapidity; that fresh regiments had been ordered out; that Lord Roberts had been appointed to the supreme command in South Africa, and that Lord Kitchener was coming out as chief of his staff. The fact, too, that the Volunteers had been asked to send companies to the regiments

to which they were attached, that the City had undertaken to raise a strong battalion at its own expense, that the Yeomanry were to furnish ten thousand men, and that public spirit had risen to fever heat, soon showed that these apprehensions were without foundation, and that Britain was still true to herself, and was showing the same indomitable spirit that had carried her through many periods of national depression, and brought her out triumphant at the end.

Christmas passed cheerily; no gun was fired on either side, although the Boers worked diligently at their trenches; and our men feasted as they had not done since they landed at Durban. Bacon, milk, fresh bread, beef, and a quart of beer were served out for each man, and on these men and officers made a memorable meal; the latter producing the last bottles of wine and spirits that had been specially sent up to them from Maritzburg. And on that and the following day there were sports—lemon-cutting, tent-pegging, races for the cavalry; athletic sports, tugs-of-war, mule and donkey races for the infantry. The drums and fifes played national airs, and the sailors bore their full share in the fun. As time went on the preparations for the next move advanced. None were more pleased at the prospect of active work again than the Colonial Volunteers, who had several times entreated to be allowed to go out and drive back the bands of plundering Boers, who were still wasting the farms and destroying the farmhouses and furniture of the loyalists.

On the 27th a small party of Captain Brookfield's scouts had been sent out to reconnoitre the windings and turnings of the Tugela to the east, to ascertain as far as possible what the Boer positions were on that side, and whether they had placed bodies

of skirmishers on the south side of the river as they did opposite Fort Wylie. Included in the party, which was a hundred strong, was the Johannesburg section. When well away from the camp they were broken up into small parties, the better to escape the observation of the Boers on the Hlangwane and other heights. The instructions given by their commander were that they should take every advantage of ground to conceal their movements from the enemy, but where the ground near the river was level and fit for galloping they should dash across it, and, if not fired at, should skirt along the banks, mark if there were any tracks by which horses or cattle had at some time come down to the water, and observe if similar tracks were to be seen on the opposite bank, as this would show that, though possibly only in dry weather, the river was fordable there. Where the ground was too broken and rock-covered to permit of horses passing rapidly across it, they were to dismount and crawl down the river to make their observations.

Only a small portion of the troop had been engaged on this work, the main body were to keep along on the hills, maintaining a vigilant watch over the country to the south and east as well as that around them, as many parties of marauding Boers were known to be still across the river. Knowing the sharpness of the lads, Captain Brookfield had told off their section to explore the river bank, a choice which excited no jealousy among the rest, as these were hoping for a brush with some wandering party of Boers, and the satisfaction of rescuing cattle and goods they might be carrying off. His instructions to Chris were that he was to detach two of his party at each mile, choosing points where they could best make their way to

the river unobserved. As he himself with the main body would go up considerably farther, each pair, when they had searched their section, were to ride a mile or so back from the river and fall in with the main body on its return.

Riding rapidly along, Chris carried out his instructions, until, when some twelve miles from the camp, he remained with only Sankey with him. The country they had passed was rolling, and from time to time he had caught sight of small parties of Captain Brookfield's scouts. Arriving at a spot where there was a slight depression running down towards the river, he said, "We may as well follow it, Sankey. It will deepen into a donga presently, no doubt, and we can leave our horses there and go on on foot. It looks to me as if this had been used as a path. Of course it may only have been made by cattle going down to the water, but it may lead to a drift. If it is, we must be all the more careful, for it is just at those points that the Boers are very likely to be on the look-out."

They rode for some distance and then dismounted, knee-haltered their horses, and moved forward cautiously. Chris still believed they were on a track, but the heavy rains of the week before had sent the water rushing down it in a torrent, which would have destroyed any marks there might have been. When they could see the opening to the river in front of them they climbed the side of the donga. All seemed quiet, and, stooping and taking advantage of the bushes, they crept forward to the edge of the water. There was no sign of a break in the opposite bank.

"There is no drift here," Chris said. "If there had been there would be a pass cut or worn down on the other side.

Now let us push on, but don't show yourself more than you can help; any Boer lurking on the other side could hardly miss us. A hundred and fifty yards, I should say, is about the width."

After walking some little distance along they suddenly came upon another break in the bank.

"There is a break opposite, Sankey. Ten to one this is a drift. The question is, how deep is it? You can see the river is not as high as it was by four feet, and I dare say that it will be lower yet if we get another week of fine weather. It's very important to find out. I will try to ford it; it's hardly likely there are any Boers so far down, but have your rifle ready, and keep a sharp look-out on the opposite side."

A minute later they went down the slope. "Keep back under the shelter of these bushes as soon as I go in, Sankey." Then he stepped into the water and waded out. In a few yards it was up to his waist; then it deepened slowly. He was a third of the distance across when two rifles cracked out from some bushes on the opposite bank. Chris felt a sudden smart pain in his ear. He instantly threw himself down in the water, and, diving, made for the shore, allowing the stream to take him down. Swimming as hard and as long as he could, he came for a moment to the surface, turning on his back before he did so, and only raising his mouth and nose above water. He took a long breath and then sank again, swimming this time towards the shore. His breath lasted until he was in water too shallow to swim farther, and, leaping to his feet, he dashed up the bank and threw himself down. He heard two bullets hum close to him, but the Boers had not been looking in his direction, and only caught sight

of him in time to take a snap-shot. He crawled along through the high, coarse grass, feeling very anxious as to what had become of Sankey. He had heard the report of the Boer rifles, but there came no reply from his friend, who would assuredly have been lying in shelter in readiness to shoot as soon as he saw a flash on the opposite bank. Could he have forgotten to take cover the instant he himself entered the water, could he possibly have remained standing there watching him? Two shots had been fired: one had certainly hit his ear; had the other been aimed at Sankey? He crawled along until he came to the point where he could see down on to the road. To his horror Sankey was lying there on his back.

CHAPTER XIII

PRISONERS

THE exclamation that burst from Chris's lips as he saw Sankey on the ground was answered by another from his friend.

"Thank God that you are there, Chris! I have been in an awful state about you. I saw you go down into the water just as I was bowled over. I made sure that you were killed, and I was in a state, as you may imagine, till I heard two more shots. That gave me a little hope; for as you had not been killed by the first, you might have escaped the others."

"But what is the matter with you, Sankey? Where are you hit?"

"I am hit in the arm. I can't tell much about it. I only

know that I went slap down; and there is certainly something the matter with my shoulder. Like an idiot I did not take shelter as you told me, but I was watching you so anxiously I never thought about it. If I had not been a fool I should have jumped up and got under cover at once; but I fancy I must have knocked my head as I fell. At any rate, I did not think about moving till I heard those two shots."

"It is just as well that you didn't," Chris said. "They could have put half a dozen bullets in you with their Mausers before you had moved a foot. The question is, what is to be done?"

"Have you got your rifle, Chris?"

"Yes, I stuck to that, and I expect it is all right; these cartridges are quite water-tight. The question is, how to get you out of their line of sight."

"The best plan will be for me to roll over and over," Sankey said. "I expect it will hurt a bit, but that is no odds."

"No, no; don't do that yet. Let us think if we can't contrive some plan of attracting their attention."

"Don't do anything foolish, Chris," Sankey said earnestly. "I would rather jump up and make a run for it than that anything should happen to you."

"I will be careful, Sankey. The first thing to do is to find out whether there are only two of these fellows or half a dozen. Where I am lying now the ground is a foot lower than it is just at the edge of the bank. I will put my cap on my rifle and raise it so as just to show."

The instant he did so three or four rifles cracked and two bullets passed through the cap. As it dropped, a shout of

triumph rose from the Boers. He at once crawled forward, and as he did so five of them ran down the bank and as many more stood up, believing that both the scouts had been killed.

Throwing the magazine into play Chris fired three shots in close succession, and then rolled over two or three yards, half a dozen bullets cutting the grass at the spot he had just left. Peering cautiously out again he saw that the Boers had all disappeared except two, one of whom lay apparently dead just at the edge of the water; the other was sitting down, but was waving a white handkerchief.

"I am not going to shoot you," Chris muttered, "though I know the fellows with you would put a bullet at once into Sankey if they thought that he was alive. Hullo, there!" he shouted in Dutch; "I will let you carry off your wounded man and the dead one if you will let me carry off my dead comrade."

The answer was three bullets, but he had drawn back a yard or two before he spoke, and was in shelter. The thought of firing again at the wounded man did not enter Chris's mind, and he crawled back to the spot where he had before spoken to Sankey. The latter was looking anxiously up.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Well, I wish you would not do it," Sankey said angrily. "If you do I will get up, and they can either pot me or take me prisoner."

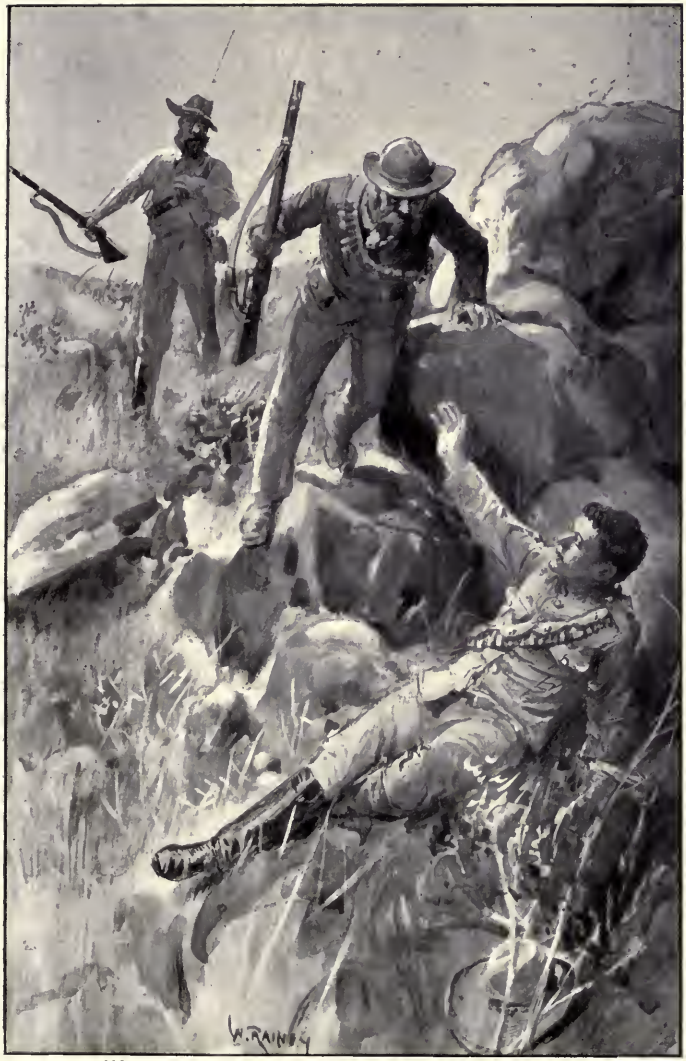
"Don't be an ass, Sankey. I am going on all right. I have shot two of them; there are about a dozen of them over there, I should say. Now let us talk reasonably. Of course, if I was sure they would not cross, I would make off to

where the horses are, ride out, and meet Brookfield and the others as they come back. The orders were that we were to join them in about an hour and a half, which would give them time to go seven or eight miles farther, and for us to do our work thoroughly. But I am afraid that if I went away the Boers would presently guess I had done so, and would come across and carry you off. But though it would be no joke for you to be taken prisoner to Pretoria, it would be a good deal better than for you to have two or three more rifle bullets in your body, which I am sure you would have were you to move. So we must risk it. Anyhow, I will stop for another hour. There will be plenty of time then for me to make off and meet the others."

Chris crept forward again and watched the opportunity. Half an hour later he saw what he thought was a head appear, and at once fired, rolling over, as before, the instant he had pulled the trigger. Three or four shots answered his own almost instantly, and there was a laugh that told him that they had practised the same trick that he had done, and had only raised a hat to draw his shot. Again there was silence for some time. Then he went back and told Sankey that he was about to start.

"All right, Chris! I shall be very glad when you have gone. You will get hit sooner or later if you go on firing, and I shall be a great deal more comfortable when you are once off. I don't believe they will venture across the drift; they know how straight you shoot."

Chris crawled back for some distance, and then got down into the road. He had scarcely done so when a shot rung out fifty yards away. His right leg gave way and he fell, and



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"WITH A SHOUT OF TRIUMPH THE TWO BOERS RAN DOWN"

with a shout of triumph two Boers ran up to him. Chris did not attempt to move. The rifle had flown from his hand as he fell, and lay some five or six yards away.

"I surrender," he said when they ran up to him.

"Well, rooinek," they exclaimed, "you are a brave young fellow, to make a fight alone against a dozen of us. It would have been wiser if you had gone away when you were lucky enough to get up the bank without being hit. What was the use of staying by your dead comrade?"

"He is not dead," Chris said. "He is hit in the arm or shoulder, but he knew if he moved he would be hit again to a certainty."

"But where are you hurt?"

"In the calf of my leg."

"It is lucky for you," the Boer said, "that I stumbled just as I fired. Now, get up and I will carry you across the drift."

They helped him up, and the other assisted him on to his shoulders. The man's clothes were wet.

"Did you swim the river?" Chris asked.

"No, there is a drift a mile lower down. It is a bad one, but we managed to get across. We knew that you were alone, and as you seemed determined to remain here, we made sure of getting you."

As they came near to Sankey, Chris called out, "You can get up, Sankey; they have beaten us."

"I am very glad to hear your voice," Sankey replied as he raised himself into a sitting position. "When I heard that shot behind me I made sure it was all up with you. Where are you hit?"

"Only in my calf. Luckily this gentleman who is carrying

me stumbled just as he fired, and I got the ball there instead of through my head. It serves me right for not having thought before that some of them might cross somewhere else and take us in rear. Well, it can't be helped; it might have been a good deal worse."

The other Boer had picked up the two rifles. They now entered the river. The stream in the middle was breast-high, and the Boer with the rifles told Sankey to hold on to him, which he was glad to do, for the force of the stream almost took him off his feet. The other Boers had now left their hiding-places, and received them when they reached the opposite bank. The one who seemed to be their leader said, not unkindly, "You have given us a great deal of trouble, young fellows, and killed one of our comrades and badly wounded another."

"If you had let us alone we should have been very glad to have let you alone," Chris said.

The Boers laughed at the light-heartedness of their prisoner, and then examined their wounds. Chris had, as he said, been hit in the calf. The ball had entered behind, and had come out close to the bone. Chris believed that he could walk, but thought it best to affect not to be able to do so. The wound had bled very little, and the two holes were no larger than would be made by an ordinary slate-pencil. Sankey had been hit just below the shoulder. The ball had in his case also gone right through, and from the position of the two holes it was evident that it must have passed through the bone. The Boers bandaged the wounds, and told them to lie down under the shade of a bush, and then took their places near the bank to watch the drift again.

"I suppose we have a journey to Pretoria before us," Sankey said. "I don't care so much about myself, because that is only the fortune of war, but I am awfully sorry that you are taken, Chris, and all through my beastly folly in not taking shelter as you told me."

"Oh, we may just as well be together, Sankey! Besides, I don't mean to go to Pretoria, I can assure you. I believe I could walk now if I tried; but you may be sure I don't mean to try. I should advise you to avoid making any movement with your arm; make them put it in a sling. When they start with us, we had better be sent up with wounded prisoners rather than with the others. They won't look so sharply after the wounded, and it will be very hard if we cannot manage to slip away somehow. I hope the others will find the horses all right, or that, if they don't, the horses will find their own way back."

"Oh, they are safe to find them!" Sankey said confidently. "There will be a hunt for us when it is found that we have not joined the others. Anyhow, they will search to-morrow. I am quite sure that some of our fellows will be out the first thing in the morning, and I dare say they will take a couple of the natives with them. If they start at the point where we turned off they will track the horses down that donga without any difficulty, and even if they have strayed away they will soon have them."

"Yes, I suppose they will be all right," Chris agreed. "Of course we have got the spare horses, but we should miss our own, and I think they are as fond of us as we are of them."

As the sun got low two of the Boers brought up four ponies which were grazing some little distance from the river. They

lifted Chris on to one, and helped Sankey to mount another, and then, taking their seats on the other horses, rode off at a walk, and arrived an hour and a half later at a camp in a hollow behind Fort Wylie. Here they were put into a large tent, where some thirty wounded prisoners were lying. A German surgeon at once examined and again bandaged their wounds.

"You are neither of you hurt badly," he said in English. "A fortnight and you will have little to complain of. These Mauser bullets make very slight wounds, except when they hit a vital spot. You are a good deal better off than most of your comrades here."

As it was now dark they lay down at once, after taking a basin of excellent soup. The German ambulance was scrupulously clean. The more serious cases were put in beds, those less severely wounded lay on the ground between them; for the number of wounded to be dealt with was very large, and in the tents in which the Boers were treated were many terribly mangled by fragments of shrapnel and lyddite shells. The boys were some time before they went off to sleep, for their wounds smarted a good deal. However, they presently fell off, and it was broad daylight when they woke. Chris lay where he was, while Sankey got up and went round the tent. The men all belonged to either the Devon or the Queen's Own regiment. Most of them were awake, and all asked anxiously for news from Chieveley, and looked disappointed when they heard that it was likely to be some time before a fresh attempt was made to relieve Ladysmith.

"They are all right there. Of course they were disappointed that we did not get in, but they have provisions enough to last for some time yet."

"The Boers don't seem to think so," one of the men said. "As they were carrying us in here I heard one of them say that they had certainly got Ladysmith now, for the provisions there were pretty nearly exhausted, and in a few days they would have to surrender. If they did not, they meant to carry it by assault."

"I don't think they will do that," Sankey said confidently.

"Not they," the soldier replied scornfully. "They will find that it is a very different thing meeting our chaps in the open to what it is squatting in a trench, and blazing away without giving us as much as a sight of them. It is a beastly cowardly way of fighting, I calls it. I was not hit till just the end of the day, and I had been blazing away from six in the morning, and I never caught sight of one of them. I should not have minded being hit if I could have bowled two or three of them over first."

After breakfast the surgeon said to the two lads: "You will be sent off in half an hour; all the slight cases are to go on. There may be another battle any day, and room must be made for a fresh batch of wounded."

"Very well, sir," Chris replied; "as we have to go, it makes no difference to us whether it is to-day or next week."

"You are colonists, I suppose, as you have not the name of any regiment on your shoulder-straps?"

"Yes, sir; we belong to Johannesburg. I know your face. You are Dr. Muller, are you not?"

"Yes; I do not recognize you."

"I am the son of Mr. King, sir; and my comrade is the son of Dr. Sankey."

"I know them both," the doctor said. "I am not one of

those who think that the Uitlanders have no grievances, and I am not here by my own choice. But I was commandeered, and had no option in the matter. Well, I am sorry for you, lads. For though I believe that in the long run your people will certainly win, I think it will be a good many months before they are in Pretoria. They fight splendidly. I watched the battle until the wounded began to come in, and the way those regiments by the railway advanced under a fire that seemed as if nothing could live for a minute, was marvellous. But, brave as they are, they will never force their way through these hills. They will never get to Ladysmith. Well, perhaps we shall meet some day in Johannesburg again."

"Yes, doctor. I suppose we shall be taken up in waggons?"

"You will, for a time, certainly. But I don't know about your friend."

"Oh, do order him to be sent up with me, doctor, that is, if it will not hurt him too much. You see, his wound is really more serious than mine, as the ball has gone through the bone."

"Yes. I have a good many cases of that sort, but all seem to be healing rapidly. However, I will strain a point, and give instructions that he is to be among those who must go in the waggons."

"Thank you, sir," both boys said; and Sankey added: "We are great friends, sir. Though I don't care for myself, it would be a great comfort to us to be together, and my wound really hurts me a good deal."

"I have no doubt it does," the surgeon said. "You can't

expect a ball to pass through muscle and bone without causing pain."

Half an hour later some natives came into the tent, and under the directions of the surgeon carried out Chris and three others whose wounds were all comparatively slight, and placed them in a waggon which already contained eight other wounded prisoners. Sankey, with his arm in a sling, walked out and was lifted into the waggon, into which he could indeed scarcely have climbed without assistance. Seven more were collected at other tents, and the waggon then moved off and joined a long line that were waiting on the road. Some more presently came up, and when the number was complete, the native drivers cracked their whips with reports like pistols, and the oxen got into motion. Some twenty mounted Boers kept by the side of the waggons. They followed the road until within four or five miles of Ladysmith, then turned off, crossed the Klip river, and came to a spot where a hospital camp had been erected; here they halted for the night.

The wounded were provided with soup and bread, and such as were able to walk were allowed to get out and stroll about. The surgeon who accompanied the train, and the doctor in charge of the hospital, attended to all the serious cases, and these were carried into the tent for the night, thus making room for the others to lie at length in the waggons. Only three of these contained British wounded, the others were all occupied by Boers. Chris and Sankey excited the admiration of the wounded soldiers by conversing with the Boers and the natives in their own languages. Most of the Boers, indeed, could speak English perfectly, but did not now condescend to use it. Some even refused to speak in Dutch to the lads, as

their dislike to the colonists who had taken up arms against them was even more bitter than that which they felt for the soldiers.

For six days they travelled on; at the end of that time Chris felt sure that he could walk without difficulty. He had, at very considerable pain to himself, each night undone his bandage, and had with his finger scratched at the two tiny wounds until they were red and inflamed, so that on the two occasions on which they were examined by the doctor, they appeared to be making but little progress towards healing. The inflammation was, however, only on the surface, and after several furtive trials, Chris declared that he was ready for a start. A move was generally made before daylight, in order that a considerable portion of the day's journey should be got over before the heat became very great.

"Are you quite sure, Chris?"

"I am as sure as anybody can be who has not actually tried it. I may be a little stiff at the start, but I believe that once off, I shall be right for eight or ten miles; and after the first day, ought to be able to do double that."

They had been travelling at the rate of about twelve miles a day, and halted that night near Newcastle. Chris heard from the guards that they would only go as far as Volksrust, and there be put in a train. The reason why this had not been done before was that the railway was fully occupied in taking down ammunition and stores, and that no carriages or trucks were available. The watch at night was always of the slightest kind. The Boers had no thought whatever that any of the wounded would try to escape. Two were posted at the leading waggon, which contained stores and medical comforts that

might, if unguarded, be looted by the native drivers. The rest either slept wrapped up in their blankets, or in any empty houses that might be near.

At nine o'clock the boys told the others in the waggon that they were going to escape. They had before informed them of their intention to do so somewhere along the road, and had taken down the names and regiments of all of them, with a note as to their condition, and the addresses of their friends. These they had promised to give to the commanding officers if they got safely back. They had filled their pockets with bread, all those in the waggon having contributed a portion of their ration that evening. After a hearty shake of the hand all round, and many low-muttered good wishes, they stepped out at the rear of the waggon, with their boots in their hands. It was a light night, and the figures of the two men on sentry over the store waggon could just be made out. There was no thought of any regular sentry duty, no marching up and down, among the Boers; the two men had simply sat down together to smoke their pipes and chat until their turn came to lie down. The lads therefore struck off on the opposite side of the waggon, and making their way with great caution, to avoid running against any of the Boers, they were soon far enough away to be able to put on their boots and walk erect.

"How does your leg feel, Chris?"

"It feels stiffer than I expected, certainly, but I have no doubt it will soon wear off. We must take it quietly till it warms up a bit."

Gradually the feeling of stiffness passed off, and going at a steady but quiet pace they made their way along the road, to

which they had returned after they had gone far enough to be sure that they were beyond the hearing of the Boers and Kaffirs. From time to time they stopped to listen for the tread of horses, which could have been heard a long way in the still night air, but they were neither met nor overtaken. After walking for five hours they came upon a stream that, as they knew, crossed the line at Ingagone station and ran into the Buffalo. They had gone but ten miles, and decided to leave the road here, follow the stream up half a mile, and then lie up. Chris admitted that he could not go much farther, and as they would not cross another stream for some distance they could not, even putting his wound aside, do better than stop here. Sankey was equally contented to rest, for his arm, which he still carried in a sling, was aching badly.

"It does not feel sore," he said, "or inflamed, or anything of that sort; it just aches as if I had got rheumatism in it. I dare say I shall have that for some time; I have heard my father say that injuries to the bones were often felt that way for years after they were apparently well, the pain coming on with changes of weather. However, it is no great odds."

Neither wanted anything to eat, but had taken long draughts when they first struck the stream, and as soon as they found a snug spot among some bushes a short distance from the water they lay down and were soon asleep. They remained quiet all the day, only going out once after a careful look round to get a drink of water. Starting again as soon as darkness closed in they walked on, with occasional rests, until within a few miles of Glencoe, having followed the line of the railway, where they had no chance whatever of meeting anyone. Here they again halted at a stream. They had

agreed that they would on the following night cross the line between Glencoe and Dundee, and take the southern road by which the British force retired after the battle there. By that route they would be altogether out of the line of Boers coming from Utrecht or Vryheid towards the Boer camps round Ladysmith. Their stock of food was, however, now running very short, and they ate their last crust before starting that evening. This they did earlier than usual, as they were determined if possible to get some bread at Dundee. They knew that a few of the residents had remained there, and probably there would not be many Boers about, for as Dundee lay off the direct line from Ladysmith to the north there would be no reason for their stopping there. Sankey had insisted on undertaking this business alone.

"It is of no use your talking, Chris," he said positively; "I can run and you can't. I may not be able to run quite as fast as I could; but I don't suppose this arm will make much difference, and anyhow, I could swing it for a bit, and I would match myself against any Boer on foot. We will cross the line, as we agreed, about a mile from Dundee. When we strike the southern road you can sit down close to it, and I will go in."

"I don't like it," Chris said, "but I see that it would be the best thing. I wish we had our farmers' suits with us, then I should not fear at all."

"I don't think that makes much odds, Chris, lots of the Boers have taken to clothes of very much the same colour; really, the only noticeable thing about us is our caps. If I come upon a loyalist I will see if I can get a couple of hats for us, either of straw or felt would be all right. Well, don't

worry yourself; it will be a rum thing if I can't bring you out something for breakfast and dinner to-morrow."

"Don't forget a little bit extra for supper to-night, Sankey," Chris laughed; "that crust went a very short distance, and I feel game for at least a good-sized loaf."

Although he said good-bye to his friend cheerfully, Chris felt more downhearted than he had done since he had said farewell to his mother more than two months before, as Sankey disappeared in the darkness, leaving him sitting among some bushes close to the road. His last words had been, "It is somewhere about nine o'clock now; if I am not back by twelve don't wait any longer. But don't worry about me; if I am caught, I have no doubt sooner or later I shall give them the slip again, but I don't think there is any real occasion for you to bother. Unless by some unlucky fluke, I am safe to get through all right." Then with a wave of his hand he started confidently along the road.

He met no one until he was close to the town. The first thing he had determined upon was to get hold of a hat somehow. The houses were scattered irregularly about in the outskirts of the town; but very few lights were to be seen in the windows.

"Of course they have all been plundered," he said to himself; "but if I only had a light I have no doubt I should be able to find an old hat somewhere among the rubbish, but in the dark there is no chance whatever." Presently he saw a light in a window in a detached house of some size. He made his way noiselessly up and looked in. A party of five or six Boers were sitting smoking round a table.

'The place has not been sacked," he said to himself; "there-

fore there is no doubt the owner is a traitor. It is a beastly custom these Boers have of wearing their hats indoors as well as out, still there are almost sure to be some spare ones in the hall. A Boer out on the veldt would not be likely to possess more than the hat he wears, but a fellow living in such a house as this would be safe to have a variety for different sorts of weather. At any rate I must try."

He took off his boots, and then stole up to the front door and turned the handle noiselessly. As he expected, no light was burning there, but the door of the room in which the men were sitting was not quite closed, and after he had stood still for a minute, his eyes, accustomed to the greater darkness outside, took in his surroundings. To his great delight he saw that four or five hats of different shapes and materials were hanging there, and a heap of long warm coats were thrown together on a bench. Looking round still more closely he saw five or six rifles in the corner by the door, and to these were hanging as many bandoliers. He first took down two felt hats of different sizes, and picked out two of the coats; then, with great care to avoid any noise, he took two rifles with their bandoliers from the corner and crept out through the door, which he closed behind him carefully; for if they found it open the Boers might look round and discover that some of their goods were missing, whereas any one of them coming casually out, even with a light, would not be likely to notice it. He put on one of the bandoliers, then a coat, and then slung one of the rifles behind him; then, after putting on his boots he went out with the other articles and hid them inside the gate of an evidently deserted house a hundred yards from the other. He felt sure that even when the loss was discovered there would

be no great search made for the thief. It would be supposed that some passing Kaffir had come in and stolen the things, and they would consider that until the following morning it would be useless to look for him.

Feeling now perfectly confident that he could pass unsuspected, he entered the principal street. Here there were a good many Boers about, but none paid the slightest attention to him. Presently he came to a store that was still open. The owner was, of course, Dutch. He had been a pronounced loyalist when Sankey was last in Dundee, but had evidently thought it prudent to change sides when the British left. Sankey had been in the shop twice with Willesden, and had found the man very civil, and, as he thought, an honest fellow, but with so much at stake he dared not trust him now. Food he must have, that was certain, but if he had to obtain it by threats, he must do it at one of the outlying houses. It would be dangerous anyhow, for, though he could frighten a man into giving him what he required, he could not prevent him from giving the alarm afterwards. While he was looking on, a mounted Boer stopped at the shop door. He dismounted at once, and lifted a large bundle from his saddle.

"Look here!" he said to the shopkeeper, "I have just come into the town, having ridden up from near Greytown. I picked up some loot at a house that had been deserted. Here are twenty bottles of wine and a lot of tea—I don't know how much. There was a chest half-full, and I emptied it into a cloth. What will you give me for them? I am riding home to Volksrust. I want three loaves and a couple of bottles of dop[1], and the rest in money."

[1] The common country spirit.

The bargaining lasted for some minutes, the store-keeper saying that the wine was of no use to him, for no Boer ever spent money on wine; the tea, of course, was worth money, but he had now a large stock on hand, and could give but little for it. However, the bargain was at last struck. The Boer brought out the bread and two bottles of spirits and placed them in his saddle-bag, then he went back into the shop to get the money. The moment he entered, Sankey moved quietly up to the other side of his horse, transferred the bottles of spirits to his own pocket, and then, thrusting the loaves under his coat, crossed the street, and turned down a lane some twenty yards farther on. He had gone but a few steps when he heard a loud exclamation followed by a torrent of Dutch oaths. He stood up for a moment in a doorway, and heard the sound of heavy feet running along the street he had left, with loud shouts to stop a thief who had robbed him. The instant that he had passed Sankey walked on again, and in five minutes was in the outskirts of the town. He made his way to the place where he had hidden the other things, and, taking them up, walked briskly on until he came to the bushes where his friend was anxiously expecting him. As he uttered his name Chris sprang out.

"I had not even begun to expect you back, Sankey. How have you done? I see that you have got on another hat and a coat."

"That is only a part of it. I have got three loaves and two bottles of dop, and a coat and a hat for you, and a rifle and ammunition, as well as clothes for myself, and the gun that you see over my shoulder."

"But how on earth did you do it, Sankey?"

"Honestly, my dear Chris, perfectly honestly. The rifles and clothes were fairly spoils of war, the loaves and spirits were stolen from a thief, which I consider to be a good action; but let us go on, I will tell you about it as we walk. Here is your bandolier, slip that on first; there is your coat and hat. Now I will put the sling of the rifle over your shoulder. There you are, complete, a Boer of the first water! I will carry the bottles and the bread. Now, let's be going on."

Then he told Chris how he had obtained his spoil, and they both had a hearty laugh over the thought of the enraged Dutchman rushing down the street shouting for the eatables of which he had been bereaved.

"It was splendidly managed, Sankey. I shall have to appoint you as caterer instead of Willesden. He pays honestly for all he wants for the mess, but I see that if we entrust the charge to you, we shall not have to draw for a farthing upon our treasure chest. And how is your arm feeling?"

"I have almost forgotten that I have an arm," Sankey said. "I suppose the excitement of the thing drove out the rheumatics."

"We might have some supper," Chris suggested.

"No, no, we must wait till we can get water. I can't take dop neat."

"But how are you going to mix it when you do get water?"

"I had not thought of that, Chris," Sankey said in a tone of disgust. "Well, I suppose we shall be reduced to taking a mouthful of this poison, and then a long drink of water to dilute it. We shall not have very far to go, because, if you remember, we crossed a little stream three or four miles after we rode out from Dundee. I am as hungry as a hunter, but

it would destroy all the pleasure of the banquet if we had to munch dry bread with nothing to wash it down."

After walking two miles farther they came upon the stream, and, going fifty yards up it, so as to run no risk of being disturbed, they sat down and enjoyed a hearty meal.

CHAPTER XIV

SPION KOP

"IT is almost a pity that you did not commandeer two ponies and saddles while you were about it," Chris laughed, as they set off again, feeling all the better for their meal. "We only want that to complete our outfit."

"You should have mentioned it before I started, Chris. There is no saying what I might not have done; and really, without joking, a pony is one of the easiest things going to steal when there are Boers about. They always leave them standing just where they dismount, and will be in a store or a drinking-place for an hour at a time without attending to them."

"It is not the difficulty, but the risk; for even if a thief gets off with a pony, he is almost sure to be hunted down. It is regarded as a sort of offence against the community, and a man, whether a native or a mean white, would get a very short shrift if he were caught on a stolen horse."

"Yes, I know. Still, for all that, if I could come upon a saddled pony, and there was a chance of getting off with it, I should take it without hesitation as a fair spoil of war."

"Yes, so should I, for the betting would be very strongly against our running across its owner; and in the next place, it would greatly increase our chance of getting safely through. It is the fact of our being on foot that will attract attention. We could walk about a camp full of Boers without anyone noticing it, but to walk into the camp would seem so extraordinary, that we should be questioned at once. A Boer travelling across the country on foot would be a sight hitherto unknown."

"There I agree with you; and I do think that when we get to Helpmakaar, which we can do to-morrow evening if we make a good long march to-night, we had better see if we can't appropriate a couple of ponies. We can walk boldly into the place, and no one would notice we were new-comers. There are sure to be ponies standing about, and it will be hard if we cannot bag a couple. Then we can ride by the road south from there to Greytown, and after crossing the Tugela, strike off by the place where we had the fight near Umbala mountain, which would be a good landmark for us, and from there follow our old line back to Estcourt. It would be rather shorter to go through Weenen, but there may be Boers about, and the few miles we should save would not be worth the risk."

They made a long journey that night, slept within seven or eight miles of Helpmakaar, and started late in the afternoon. When near the town they left the main road, passed through some fields, and came into the place that way, as, had they entered by the road, they were likely to be questioned. Once in the little town, they walked about at their ease. It did not seem that there were any great number of Boers there, but

the town was well within the district held by them, and such loyalists as remained were sure to be keeping as much as possible within their houses. In front of the principal inn were nearly a score of Boer ponies, but the lads considered it would be altogether too risky to attempt to take a couple of these, as their owners might issue out while they were doing it; however, they stood watching. For some time there was a sound of singing and merriment within, and for a quarter of an hour no one came out.

"If we had taken a couple of ponies at first," Sankey said savagely, "we might have been two miles away by this time."

"Yes; I don't know that it is too late now. Wait till they strike up another song with a chorus, none of them is likely to leave the room while that is going on, and it will drown the sound of hoofs."

There were few people about in the streets; and even had anyone passed as they were mounting, he could not tell that they were not the legitimate owners.

"If anyone should come out," Chris said, "don't try to ride away. We should have the whole lot after us in a minute, and it is not likely we should have got hold of the fastest ponies. Besides, they would shoot us before we got far. So if anyone does come out and raises an alarm, jump off at once and run round the nearest corner, and then into the first garden we come to. We should be in one before they could come out, mount their ponies, and give chase. Once among the gardens we should be safe. If the man who comes out does not shout we would pay no attention to him, but ride away quietly. If the ponies don't happen to belong to him or some friend of his, he would not be likely to interfere, for he would suppose

that we were two of the party who had left the place without his noticing them. But if he gives a shout, jump off at once, and rush round the corner of the nearest house."

They waited for a minute or two, and then two Boers came out, mounted a couple of the ponies, and rode quietly down the street. At that moment another song was struck up. "That is lucky. If anyone comes out and sees us mounting, he will take us for the two men who have just ridden off." Then they strolled leisurely across the street, took the reins of two of the ponies, sprang into the saddles, and started at a walk, which, twenty yards farther, was quickened into a trot. The two men had fortunately gone in the other direction. Once fairly beyond the town, they quickened their pace. "Now we are Boers all over," Chris said exultantly; "but there is one thing, Sankey, we must be careful not to go near any solitary farmhouse. There must still be some loyal men left in these parts, and if we fell in with a small party of them the temptation to pay off what they have suffered might be irresistible."

"Yes, Chris; but they certainly would not shoot unless certain of bringing us both down, for if one escaped, he would return with a party strong enough to wipe them out altogether. However, we need not trouble about that for the present, though no doubt it will be well to be careful when we are once across the Tugela."

"Well, we shall be there long before morning; it is not more than seven- or eight-and-twenty miles."

They rode fast, for it was possible that when the loss of the ponies was discovered someone who might have noticed them go down the street might set the Boers on the track, and in

that case they would certainly be hotly pursued. The ponies, however, turned out to be good animals, and as the lads were at least a couple of stones lighter than the average Boer, they could not be overtaken unless some of the ponies happened to be a good deal better than these.

After riding at full speed for eight or nine miles they broke into a walk, stopping every few minutes to listen. They knew that they would be able to hear the sound of pursuit at least a mile away, and as their ponies would start fresh again, they were able to take things quietly. So, sometimes cantering, sometimes walking, they reached the river at about one o'clock in the morning. On the opposite bank stood the little village of Tugela Ferry. Here there was a drift, and there was no occasion to use the ferry-boat except when the river was swollen by rain. It now reached only just up to the ponies' bellies; they therefore crossed without the least difficulty, and after passing through the village, left the road, and struck off across the country to the south-west. When four or five miles away they halted at a donga, and leading the ponies down, turned them loose to feed, ate their supper, and were soon asleep.

It was no longer necessary to travel by night, and at eight o'clock they started again. They kept a sharp look-out from every eminence, and once or twice saw parties of mounted men in the distance and made detours to avoid them. So far as they were aware, however, they were not observed. The distance to be ridden from their last halting-place was about thirty-five miles, and at one o'clock they were within five miles of Estcourt. On an eminence about a mile in front of them they saw a solitary horseman.

"That is evidently one of our scouts," Chris said. "I dare

say there is a party of them somewhere behind him. If I am not mistaken I can see two or three heads against the sky-line —they are either heads or stones. We should know more about it if the Boers hadn't bagged our glasses when they took us."

Two or three minutes later Sankey said, "Those little black spots have gone, so they were heads. I dare say they are wondering who we are, and put us down either as Boers or as loyal farmers, though there cannot be many of them left in this district."

Presently from behind the foot of the hill six horsemen dashed out. The lads had already taken the precaution of taking off their hats and putting on forage-caps again.

"It is always better to avoid accidents," Chris said. "It would have been awkward if they had begun to shoot before waiting to ask questions, especially as we could not shoot back. They are Colonials; one can see that by their looped-up hats, which are a good deal more becoming than those hideous khaki helmets of our men."

The horsemen had unslung their guns, but seeing that the strangers had their rifles still slung behind them, with apparently no intention of firing, they dropped into a canter until they met the lads.

"Who are you?" the leader asked. "Do you surrender?"

"We will surrender if you want us to," Chris said, "though why we should do so I don't know. We belong to the Maritzburg Scouts, and were taken prisoners, being both wounded, eight or nine days ago; and, as you see, we have got away."

"I dare say it is all right," the officer said; "but at any rate we will ride with you to Estcourt."

M 683

"PRESENTLY FROM BEHIND THE FOOT OF THE HILL SIX HORSEMEN DASHED OUT"

"We shall be glad of your company, though I don't suppose we shall be identified until we get to Chieveley. Will you please tell us what has taken place since we left?"

"That, I think, had better be deferred," the officer said dryly. "We don't tell our news to strangers."

"Quite right, sir!"

"It is evident that you are not Dutch," the officer went on; "but there is more than one renegade Englishman fighting among the Boers, and, except for your caps, you certainly look as if you belonged to the other side rather than to ours."

"Yes, they are Boer coats, Boer ponies, and Boer guns," Chris said. "We have taken the liberty of borrowing them as they borrowed our guns and field-glasses. Whether they borrowed our horses we shall not know till we get back. You see," he went on, opening his coat, "we still have our uniforms underneath. Who is at Estcourt now? Ah! by the way, we are sure to find some officers in the hospital who know us."

The officer by this time began to feel that the account Chris had given him of himself was correct, and when they arrived at Estcourt it was rather as a matter of form than anything else that he accompanied him to the hospital. Upon enquiry, Chris found that among the wounded there was one of the naval officers he had travelled with from Durban. Upon the surgeon in charge being told that he wished to see him, he was allowed to enter with the officer. The wounded man at once recognized him.

"Ah, King!" he said, "I am glad to see you again. Have you brought me down a message from Captain Jones or any of our fellows?"

"No; I am very sorry to find you here, Devereux, but am glad

to see you are getting better. I have really come in order that you might satisfy this gentleman, who has taken me prisoner, that I am King of the Maritzburg Scouts."

"There is no doubt about that. Why, where have you been, to be taken prisoner?"

"Oh, it was a fair capture! I was with one of my section caught while out scouting, and have got away in Boer attire, and as we were riding in we met this officer's party some five miles out, and, not unnaturally, they took us for the real thing instead of masqueraders."

"I can assure you that King is all right," the sailor said. "He came up in the train with three of his party from Durban."

"Thank you!" the officer said with a smile. "I am perfectly satisfied, and was nearly so before I came in here. Well, I wish you good-day, sir, and hope we may meet again;" and, shaking hands with Chris, he left the tent.

Chris remained chatting for a few minutes more with the sailor.

"I suppose there is no great chance of getting a bed here?" he said, as he rose to go. "We have had two pretty long days' ride, and I don't care about going on to Chieveley."

"Not a chance in the world, I should think."

"Well, it does not matter much. We have been sleeping in the open for the past five nights, and once more will make no difference. We are just back in time, Sankey," he said when he joined his friend outside. "Devereux tells me that there is a big movement going on, and that a severe fight is expected in a day or two. He hears that the baggage-train has been moving to Springfield, so that it will be somewhere

over in that direction; and I suppose we are going to move round to Acton Homes and force our way into Ladysmith through Dewdrop. You know, they say that it is comparatively flat that way."

They got rid of their long coats and fastened them to their saddles; then led their ponies to the station, and, leaving them outside, entered. An enterprising store-keeper had opened a refreshment stall for the benefit of the troops passing through, or officers coming down from the front to look after stores or to visit friends in hospital. Chris had explained their position to Devereux, and the latter had said: "Then I suppose they have eased you of all your money?"

"Yes; they did not leave us a penny."

"There is my purse with my watch in that little pocket over my bed," he said. "You must let me lend you a sovereign till I see you again." And Chris had thankfully taken the money.

They now had what to them was a gorgeous feast; some soup, cold ham, and a bottle of wine. They gave what little remains they had of bread to the ponies, and then led them a quarter of a mile out of the town and camped out with them there, the Boer coats coming in very useful. The next morning they started at daybreak, and arrived at their camp at Chieveley just as their friends were sitting down to breakfast. They were received with a shout of welcome, and a torrent of questions was poured upon them.

"I will leave Sankey to tell you all about it," Chris said. "I must go and report myself to Brookfield and get our names struck off the list of missing. I shall not be five minutes away."

The captain received Chris as heartily, though not so noisily, as his comrades had done.

"We have been very anxious about you," he said, after the first greeting. "When we came back to the point where you left us, and did not find you there, we thought there might be some mistake, and that you had ridden on. We picked up all the others, but were not uneasy until we got into camp and found that you did not return. Then two of your friends took fresh horses and rode out again, taking two of your blacks with them. The blacks found the place where you had left us, and, following your tracks down, came on your horses. Then they went on till they saw the river in front of them. The blacks traced your footsteps along near the bank till they came to a spot where there was evidently a drift, as a road was cut down to the water on both sides. They then crawled along till they could look down into the road. They were some time away, and returned with the news that they had seen below them on the road a patch of blood and the mark of a body in the mud; another step, they said, had gone down to the water and had not come back. Crawling along by the edge of the bank they found some empty cartridges. They said whoever had been up there had crawled once or twice to the edge above the sunken road where the other was lying, and that he had then gone back from the river and afterwards down into the road. A little farther there seemed to have been a fall, and then two men with big feet came to the spot, and, they asserted, carried the one who had fallen there down to the other; but they could not see what had happened then, for it was evident that the Boers were in force on the other side of the river, and they dared not go down farther to

examine the tracks. Enough had been seen, however, to show that you must both have been wounded. It was pretty certain that you had not been killed, for if so the Boers would not have troubled to carry your bodies across the drift. Now, Chris, let us hear your story."

"If you don't mind, Captain Brookfield," Chris said with a smile, "I will put off telling it for another half-hour. The fact is, breakfast is ready, and I have only had one square meal since I went away, and that was yesterday at Estcourt."

"Go, by all means," the captain laughed. "I breakfasted half an hour before you came in, and forgot that it was possible that you had not done so."

It was a full half-hour before Chris returned, and when he did so he left Sankey still telling the story of their adventures, which had made very little progress, as he had declared that he could not enjoy his breakfast if he was obliged to keep on talking all the time. When Chris, on his part, had told the story to Captain Brookfield, the latter said:

"I can't say that I am altogether surprised to see you back, though I certainly did not expect you for a long time, for I felt sure that if you and Sankey were not seriously wounded you would manage to give them the slip before you got to Pretoria; and I thought we should hear the first news of you at Durban, for it would be shorter and easier for you to make your way down again to Lorenzo Marques than to follow this line."

"We should certainly have gone that way if we had not escaped until we were near Pretoria, but it was a great deal easier to slip away from the waggons than it would have been if we had been once put into the train. I hope, sir, we have

not been returned as missing, for it will have frightened our mothers terribly if we have been."

"No; I thought that there was no occasion to give your names until you had been away for a month. If you were not heard of by that time, I should consider it certain that you were dead or at Pretoria. I knew that, as you say, it would be a terrible shock to your mothers if they were to see your names among the missing; while it could do no harm to anyone if I kept it back for a month, and put you down as missing the first time after the corps were engaged. Well, you are just back in time for a big fight, though we are not likely to take any part in it. It is supposed to be a secret as to the precise position, but orders have been privately circulated this morning. Dundonald with the regular cavalry, the Natal Horse, and the South African Light Horse went on four days ago, with one or two other colonial corps, and occupied Springfield, and the baggage-train followed them; and after occupying the place, instead of waiting for infantry to come up, he moved on to a river. Some of his men, with extraordinary pluck, swam across and managed to bring the ferry-boat over under a very heavy fire. Then a number of them crossed, scattered the Boers like chaff, and took possession of a rough hill called Swartz Kop, and held it till support came up. It was a capitally managed affair, and one cannot but regret that the same care was not shown at Hlangwane. We are to go on this afternoon, but as we are not in Dundonald's brigade I expect that our duty will be, as it was in the last fight, to guard the baggage."

"But what will Dundonald's brigade do?"

"The general opinion is, that they will push round to Acton

Homes. I am not sure that the whole force is not going that way. It would be a grand thing if it could be done; but I doubt whether the train could carry enough stores, for it would be a long way round, and we should probably have to fight two or three times at least, and it might take us five or six days."

"Then most of the infantry have gone on already?"

"Yes, Hart's and Hildyard's brigades have marched straight from Frere. By the way, did you hear of the Boer attack on Ladysmith on the night of the 6th?"

"No; that was the night we were at Glencoe. On our way up we did hear some very heavy firing. At least, we were not certain that it was firing, and rather thought it was a distant thunder-storm."

"The firing began at two o'clock in the morning," Captain Brookfield said, "and was so heavy that everyone turned out. It lasted four hours, and there was no doubt that the Boers were making a determined attack. Everyone wondered that we did not at once make a diversion. When the day broke it could be seen that numbers of mounted Boers were hurrying off from their camps among the hills towards Ladysmith, but it was not until two in the afternoon that five battalions of infantry marched down towards Colenso, and the naval guns opened in earnest on their lines. It had the effect of bringing the Boers scurrying down again to their trenches. Our fellows marched in open order and worked their way nearly down to Colenso, which was more strongly garrisoned than it had been at the time of our last attack. No doubt they had seen us preparing to advance, and strongly reinforced the garrison. Our guns were taken a long way down,

and at six o'clock their trenches were bombarded; then it came on to rain, and the Boers ceased to fire, and at seven o'clock our men turned into camp. The firing in Ladysmith had ceased some time before that."

"And what had taken place there?" Chris asked anxiously, "for I know the place has not fallen or we should have heard of it."

"No, they beat the Boers off splendidly. However, they had hard work to do it, for the heliograph flashed a signal at about nine o'clock in the morning to say that they had so far beaten off the enemy, but were much pressed. We heard the next day that this had indeed been the case. Cæsar's Camp had been taken and retaken several times—by our men at the point of the bayonet, by the Boers, by rushing up in overwhelming numbers. It is said that we have twelve hundred casualties, and the Boers at least fifteen hundred, of whom a large number were bayoneted. They say the loss fell chiefly upon the Free Staters, who were put in the front by the Transvaal people. They fought pluckily, and several of their commanders were among the killed. I should think that they would hardly try it again. A native got through two days afterwards with a despatch. We have not heard what it contained, but we fancy from what has leaked out that our defences were very weak."

"We ought to take a lesson from the Boers," Chris said. "I saw something of their trenches as we went up the railway valley, and they are wonderful."

"Yes, we must do the Boers the justice to say that they are not afraid of hard work. Ever since they first came here they have been at work everywhere every day in the week,

including Sundays. Of course, as we are not standing on the defensive, there is no occasion for us to construct works to the same extent; but I cannot myself understand why we do not throw up batteries for our guns, pushing forward zigzags every night, and advancing the batteries until we can plant all our naval and field guns within a hundred yards of Colenso, when we should be able to smash their entrenchments in no time, and effectually cover an advance across the bridge or one of the drifts. When I was in the army it was always said that the next war would be fought with the spade as much as with the rifle, but so far we have seen nothing whatever of the spade, except just by the guns. We were also taught that strong positions held by steady troops armed with magazine-guns and supported by good artillery were absolutely impregnable against direct attack. I grant that Dundee and Elandslaagte, and Belmont and Enslin on the other side, seemed to contradict that idea, but our experience here is all the other way; and if we keep on knocking our heads against those hills I suppose the axiom is likely to be finally confirmed."

"Then you don't think that we are going to fight our way into Ladysmith, Captain Brookfield?"

"Not direct into Ladysmith. Possibly we may work our way round; but after what we saw of the fire from their position, trench above trench, and miles upon miles in length, my own conviction is, that, allowing to the utmost for the gallantry and devotion of our men, we shall never win our way across those hills."

"Then we move off at two o'clock, sir?"

"Yes, fresh batches of waggons are going on, and we are to escort them, and if we reach Springfield by to-morrow

night we may think ourselves lucky, for some of the officers who went with the first lot have come back, and say that the roads are simply awful—there are dongas to be passed where the waggons sink up to their axles—and that at one point ninety oxen were fastened to a single waggon and could not pull it out from a hole in which it was sunk, and there it would be now if one of the Woolwich traction-engines hadn't got hold of it and drawn it out. They are doing splendid work, and if the War Office authorities can but take a lesson to heart, the next war we go into we shall have five hundred of them and not a single transport animal. They would cost money, no doubt, but they would eat nothing and drink nothing; they would only require to be oiled and cleaned occasionally to keep them in order, and when they were wanted they would do the work without our having to hunt the world over for transport animals. They would save their cost in one war; there would be a thousand drivers and stokers instead of twenty thousand camp-followers; it would not matter whether the country was burnt up dry or deep in grass, they would drag their fuel with them; and would save the artillery horses by dragging the guns till they were in the neighbourhood of an enemy. It might not look so pretty or picturesque as the present system, but it would be enormously more useful, and in the long run vastly more economical. I should like to see Kitchener put at the War Office with authority to sweep it out; Hercules in the Augean stable would be nothing to it."

Chris laughed at the earnestness and vehemence with which the commander spoke.

He went on. "I am an old army man, and have been as

staunch a believer in army traditions as any man, but I tell you fairly that I am disgusted at the amount of routine work, delay, and, if I may use the word, priggism, that I see going on. I am not surprised that the Colonials to a man are convinced that they would manage matters infinitely better if they were left to themselves. They would harass the Boers night and day, sweep their plundering parties out of the land, make a circuit no matter how far into Zululand, and come down behind and cut the line of railway, and blow up the bridges, and worry them out of the colony. I don't say they would succeed, but I am sure they would try, and I believe firmly that five thousand mounted Colonials fighting in their own way would relieve Ladysmith and clear Natal sooner than we with thirty thousand shall do. I am not saying that they would succeed in a Continental war, though they would certainly harass and bother any regular force four times their own strength. To succeed they would require guns and a greater degree of discipline than they have got, but such a force would be absolutely invaluable as an assistant to a regular army. Don't repeat what I say, Chris; there is a good deal of soreness of feeling on both sides already, and I don't want any utterance of mine to add to it. Still, I can assure you it has been a relief to me to let the steam off."

At the appointed hour the Maritzburg Scouts and another Colonial corps started with a train of two hundred waggons, and with immense exertion made eight miles before it became dark. The men were more often on foot than in their saddles, sometimes roping their horses to the sides of the waggons to aid the oxen, sometimes putting their shoulders to the wheels, or working with a score of others with railway-sleepers that

had been brought for the purpose, to lever the axles out of deep holes into which the wheels had sunk.

"I don't think I ever knew what it was to be really dirty before," Field said, as they finally dismounted and prepared to camp. "I thought I did know something about mud, but I can see that I did not. I feel that I am a sort of animated pie, and could be cooked comfortably in an oven. If we could but get a big fire and stand round it, our crust might peel off; and I really don't see any other way. There is one advantage in it, and that is, that we shall be able to skirmish, if necessary, across either a sandy or muddy country, without the possibility of our being made out more than fifty yards away by the keenest-sighted Boer. What do you propose, Captain Chris? If there were running water near, the course would be clear. We would lie down by turns, and be rolled over and over, thumped with stones, and rubbed with anything that came handy till we were in a state of comparative cleanliness."

"Why running water?" Chris asked. "Why not a pond?"

"A pond!" Field said, contemptuously. "Why, sir, before our section alone were washed, the water of anything short of a lake would be solid."

There was a general burst of laughter.

"Well, Field, you do us almost as much good as a wash," Peters said. "Anyhow, we are better off than the others. We have got our tents and our spirit-lamp, and can have our tea with some degree of comfort, which is more than the others will be able to do. Now, as we have not running water, I think we might as well scrape as much of this mud off as we can."

"I would almost rather remain as we are," Field said.

"Hitherto I have felt rather proud of our appearance. As we only got our uniforms when we came up here, and have always had our tents to sleep in, we looked a great deal cleaner than the average. Now we shall be conspicuous for our dirtiness."

"In spite of what Field says, I will adopt your suggestion, Peters. We had better help the Kaffirs to get up our tents first," Chris said, "then we can do the scraping while they are getting our supper ready. It is very lucky that we had the water-skins filled before starting. We should hardly taste the tea if it had been made from water from any of these spruits."

The tents were erected, and then jack-knives were taken out; and, giving mutual aid to each other, they succeeded in removing at least the main portion of the mud. That done, they sat down to supper. Fortunately, the rain that had come down steadily the greater portion of the day had now ceased, and with a tin of cocoa and milk, and some fried ham and biscuits, they made an excellent meal. Their less fortunate comrades brought their kettles, which were boiled for them one after another, until all who had waited up in hopes of their turn coming had been served. As they carried tea and their ration bread, they were able to make a fairly comfortable meal, instead of going supperless to bed, which they would otherwise have done, as few would have cared, after their hard work, to go out into the veldt to gather soaked sticks, which they would hardly have been able to light had they found them. A small ration of spirits and water was given to each of the five natives, and then the lads crept into their tents, feeling that after all, things might have been much worse.

CHAPTER XV

SPION KOP

THE country immediately round Springfield was level and well-cultivated, with pretty farmhouses and orchards scattered about. Some little distance to the west rose two hills, Swartz Kop, which had been occupied by the mounted infantry, and Spearman's Hill, named from a farm near its base. Here General Buller had established his head-quarters. Spearman's Hill, which was generally called Mount Alice, was a very important position, and here the naval guns were placed, their fire commanding the greater portion of the hills on the other side of the Tugela, and also Potgieter's Drift, where it was intended the passage of the river should be made. Swartz Kop was a less important position, though it also dominated a wide extent of country; but as ridges on the other side covered some important points from its fire, Mount Alice was selected as the position for the naval battery, and also for the signallers, as from here a direct communication could be kept up by heliograph and flash-light with one of the hills held by the defenders of Ladysmith.

It was late on the 16th when the convoy which the Maritzburg Scouts were escorting arrived at Springfield. All day they had heard the boom of artillery and the rattle of machine-guns and musketry along the line of hills on the other side of the Tugela and from the heights of Mount Alice, and groaned in spirit as they laboured at their work of assisting the waggons, that they were thus employed when hard fighting was going on within eight miles of them.

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THE NAVAL GUNS ON MOUNT ALICE

At half-past two that day Lyttleton's brigade had moved forward along the foot of Mount Alice to force the passage of the river at Potgieter's Drift. As soon as the Boers caught sight of them, they could be seen galloping forward to take their places in the trenches.

A thunder-storm that burst and a torrent of rain screened the movements of the advancing troops from view for some time, and enabled them to near the river without having to pass through any shell fire from the Boer batteries on the hill-tops. Between Mount Alice and the river the brigade passed across meadows and ploughed fields. They reached the ferry, but the boat was stuck fast, and an hour was lost at this point before a party of sailors and colonial troops accustomed to such work came forward to the aid of the Engineers, and speedily got it into working order. But in the meantime the Scottish Rifles and the Rifle Brigade had moved along the banks to the drift. Although usually almost dry, the water was now coming down it breast-deep. Two gallant fellows went across, and when they found the line of shallow water they returned and guided their comrades over. The rush of the water was so great that many would have been swept away; but, joining hands, they crossed in a line, and although this was broken several times, it was always re-formed, and not many lives were lost.

As soon as some of the troops had passed, they lined the bank until the two battalions were over, and then advanced over some low hills, clearing out a few Boers who occupied some advanced trenches. By six o'clock the ferry-boat began to carry the main body across, taking over half a company at a time; but it was not until half-past three in the morning that the horses, waggons, the guns of the brigade, and a

howitzer battery were on the northern bank, and the whole brigade established on a ridge a mile beyond the river.

The Maritzburg Scouts were delighted at receiving orders on the morning after their arrival at Springfield that they were to move forward at once and encamp close to Spearman's Farm, and to furnish orderlies for carrying messages for the general. They started at once, and after an hour's fast riding arrived at the point assigned to them.

Twenty men and an officer were at once sent to the farm-house. They took with them three tents which they had brought in the regimental waggon, and erected these some fifty yards from the house; the rest of the troop established their camp at a point indicated by a staff-officer a quarter of a mile away. It had been two o'clock in the morning before the convoy had reached Springfield, and horses and men were alike tired out; and as soon as breakfast had been prepared and eaten most of the troopers turned in to sleep. Chris and half a dozen of his party, however, obtained leave from Captain Brookfield to ascend Mount Alice and see what was going on. From half-past five a tremendous fire had been kept up on the Boer positions. The naval guns were distributing their heavy lyddite shells among the entrenchments distant from three to six miles, and occasionally throwing up a missile on to the summit of the lofty hill known as Spion Kop away to the left front. Not less steadily or effectively the howitzer battery was pounding the Boer position.

At eight o'clock the lads reached the top of Mount Alice, and watched with intense interest the picturesque and exciting scene. Here they were far better able than they had been when at Chieveley to see the general aspect of the country.

On the right from Grobler's Kloof hill after hill, separated apparently by shallow depressions, rose, and from the higher points occasional flashes of fire burst out as the guns tried their range against those on Mount Alice, whose heights, however, they failed to reach. Spion Kop stood out steep and threatening, its summit being some hundred feet higher than that of Mount Alice. They could now see that it was not, as it had appeared from the distance, an isolated and almost conical hill, but was, in fact, connected with hills farther to the left by a ridge of which it was the termination.

Immediately behind it was a deep valley, and the ascent from this side was to some extent commanded by the guns on Mount Alice and Swartz Kop. Between Spion Kop and the river there was a flat belt of country, and it was along this that Lord Dundonald had ridden with his brigade of cavalry to Acton Homes, where he was still stationed. The point of greatest interest, however, was at Trichardt's Drift, lying six miles west of Mount Alice. From their look-out they could make out the division under the command of Sir Charles Warren advancing to the ford. As far as they could see, no serious opposition was being offered; they could, however, in the intervals of silence of the guns, hear a dropping musketry fire in that direction, and a few rounds of shot from Warren's field-guns, but it was evident that only a small party of the enemy could be disputing the passage.

Peters, who was intently watching what was going on through his glasses, said: "They are at work at two points on the river. I think they are building bridges."

The naval guns dropped a few shells among the farm buildings and orchards facing the spot where the troops were

gathered, as a hint to the Boers that it was well within their range, and that they had best abstain from interfering with what was going on. In an hour from the time the troops reached the bank two bridges had been thrown across the river, and the passage began. By ten o'clock the whole were across, the firing soon after ceased, and Warren's troops bivouacked quietly. It was all over for the day, and the lads returned to their camp. The next day passed quietly, except that in the afternoon the Boer entrenchments near Spion Kop and Brakfontein, a hill facing the position occupied by Lyttleton's brigade, were pounded by the naval guns and howitzers. A message was heliographed from Ladysmith that two thousand Boers were seen moving towards Acton Homes, and as the occupation of that village was of no value until the infantry arrived there, the cavalry were recalled to a position where they could protect Warren's left flank from attack.

On the 19th, Warren pushed forward a portion of his force with a view to driving back the Boers' right and gaining the main road leading through Dewdrop to Ladysmith, while Woodgate's brigade watched Spion Kop. Fighting went on all day, the British forcing the enemy back step by step. On the 20th it began early and continued the whole day. Every inch of the ground was contested stubbornly by the Boers, but the Irish Brigade, who were in the hottest position, pressed them back fiercely with sudden rushes, and, had the rest of the division kept up with their advance, might have cleared the way through the enemy's centre. But the cannonade to which the advancing troops were exposed was terrible. Maxims and Nordenfeldts, the heavy cannon, and the field-pieces captured

from us a month before, hurled shot and shell incessantly among them, while the rattle of the Boer rifles was continuous. Still, fair progress was made, and with less loss than might have been expected in such strife. Two officers only were killed, Captain Hensley of the Dublin Fusiliers, and Major Childe, who was a most popular officer. He had a presentiment that he would fall, and actually asked a friend the evening before to have a tablet placed over his grave with the inscription, "Is it well with the child? It is well."

At three o'clock the fighting slackened, and a heavy thunderstorm seemed to be the signal for firing to cease. Later, Sir Charles Warren summoned all the officers commanding corps, and pointed out that there was not sufficient food remaining to allow of the wide circuit by Acton Homes to be carried out, and gave his opinion that, now they had won so much ground, it was better to continue to advance by the shorter line on which they were pushing, but that in order to do this it was necessary that Spion Kop, whose fire would take them in the rear, should be captured. This was unanimously agreed to, and General Warren then saw the commander-in-chief, and obtained his consent to the change of plans. It was not, however, considered necessary to take Spion Kop until the troops had farther advanced. All Sunday, fighting was continued as before, but the progress made was slower, as the Boers were largely reinforced and fresh guns brought up.

The 22nd was comparatively quiet. The situation was not improving. Five miles of rough ground had been won in as many days' fighting, but the force was becoming lengthened out and the line weaker. Lyttleton's force had to guard the line from Potgieter's Drift to Warren's right against any

attempt of the Boers to cut the lines of communication. Woodgate was similarly employed in keeping the line from Trichardt's Drift to Warren's left, and it became increasingly evident that not much farther progress could be made until the left of the advance was protected by the establishment of guns on the great hill. It was then, on the 23rd, decided that Woodgate's brigade should assault Spion Kop that night. It was known that it was not strongly held.

Starting at six o'clock, the column made its way slowly and with vast difficulty up the ascent. This was everywhere rugged and rocky, and in many places so precipitous that men had to be pushed or pulled up by their comrades.

Colonel Thorneycroft led the way with a few men, finding out the spots at which an ascent was practicable, and scouting on either side to discover if Boers were hidden; behind him followed Woodgate leading his men. He was in bad health and quite unfit for such a climb, but in spite of remonstrances he had insisted upon going, although he was obliged to be assisted at the more difficult places. The distance was not more than six miles, but it was not until nearly ten hours after starting that the summit was gained. The hilltop was enveloped in mist, and they were unseen until the Lancashire Fusiliers, who were leading, were within fifty yards of the top. Then a Boer challenged them, and directly fired his rifle. Almost instantly a dozen of his comrades joined him, and, bringing their magazines into play, opened a fierce fusillade. But the aim was hurried, they could scarce see their foes, and the Lancashire men, cheering loudly, rushed up to the crest without loss.

The Boers did not await their arrival; only one of them was

bayoneted before he turned to fly, and but two or three were overtaken by the eager soldiers. As soon as the Boers had gone, the troops set to work to construct breastworks to hold the spot they had gained against any attempts of the Boers to recapture. The ground was too rocky for digging, and the stones that were scattered thickly about were used for the purpose; but long before the breastwork could be completed a dropping fire was opened by the enemy. The morning was gray and misty, and the clouds hung heavily on the hilltop. As these cleared off slowly, it could be seen that the position was less favourable than it had seemed, for the flat crest extended some distance beyond the point they had entrenched, and from the rocks and low ridges a hot fire broke out. Before the mist cleared off, the Boers had crept up in considerable force, and were, it was evident, preparing to retake the position that had been wrested from them.

By six o'clock the scattered fire had grown into a continuous roar, the Boers occupying not only the nek itself, but the flanks of the hill. Several times our men made rushes to endeavour to clear off the foe, but these proved too costly, and they were now lying or kneeling behind the unfinished barricade. In a very short time the clouds had lifted sufficiently for the Boer artillery to discover the exact position, and from the hills on three sides a terrible fire of shot and shell, from cannon great and small and machine-guns, rained upon them. Again and again parties of men started to their feet and dashed forward to drive the hidden Boers facing them from their hiding-places. Sometimes they succeeded for a time, but their numbers thinned so fast that the survivors were forced to fall back again. To add to the horror of the situa-

tion, the shot from our own guns also fell among the defenders, the officers commanding the batteries not having been informed of the intention to occupy the hill, and knowing nothing of the situation. Scores of men were killed or wounded, but the position was held unflinchingly.

At ten o'clock General Woodgate was mortally wounded by the fragment of a shell that struck him in the eye, and Colonel Crofton took the command. He at once flashed a message to General Warren, stating that Woodgate was killed, and that reinforcements must be sent at once; General Coke was therefore ordered to take the Middlesex and Dorset regiments, and assume the command. Immediately afterwards Warren received an order from General Buller to appoint Lieutenant-colonel Thorneycroft, who was colonel of a colonial force, to take the command. It was now hoped that all was well there. Unfortunately, neither Buller nor Warren was able to give his undivided attention to the struggle on the mountain, for Lyttleton's brigade had advanced before daybreak against the eastern slopes of the hills running north from Spion Kop. They advanced briskly, their Maxims clearing out the Boers, from whose fire they suffered but little; but they sustained some loss from the shell fire from Mount Alice, the sailors having been as uninformed of the advance the brigade were to make as they were of the capture of Spion Kop.

The Scottish Rifles and the 3rd King's Royal Rifles pushed on rapidly and gained the spur farthest north. Had there been guns on Spion Kop the object of the movement would have been attained, and the advance by direct road on Ladysmith have become a possibility; but no guns had reached the

summit, and the troops there were so far from being able to render assistance that they were with difficulty maintaining their desperate resistance. As the two rifle regiments were therefore exposed to a concentrated fire from the Boer batteries, and were without support, they were directed to withdraw, but the order had to be repeated three times before it was obeyed. The fire slackened at this point to some extent in the afternoon, no farther advance being attempted, but it raged as hotly as ever on the summit of Spion Kop.

As neither General Buller nor Warren had come up to see the state of things on the all-important position of Spion Kop, General Coke went down in the evening to explain the situation. He stated that unless the artillery could silence the enemy's guns the troops could not support another day's shelling. In the evening two naval twelve-pounders, the R. A. mountain battery, and one thousand two hundred men as reliefs, started to ascend the hill and to strengthen the entrenchments. On the way up they met Colonel Thorneycroft and the rest of the force coming down, that officer, who had displayed splendid gallantry throughout the day, having decided on his own responsibility that the position could not be longer held. Strangely enough, the news of the retirement was not communicated to General Buller, who, after reporting in his despatches written next morning that Spion Kop was firmly held, was riding to the front when he for the first time learned the news. Altogether it was a day of strange blunders, redeemed only by the splendid bravery of the troops engaged.

The news came as a heavy blow to the army, but it was supposed that a fresh attempt would be made to capture the position by ascending the northern spurs that had been

carried and held for a time by the two rifle battalions. But while soldiers think only of the chances of battle, and burn to engage the enemy, a feeling only accentuated by previous failures, generals in command have to take other matters into consideration. They may feel that they may conquer in the next fight, but what is to follow? In this case the chances of success would be smaller than before, the loss more serious, for the Boers from all parts had united to oppose us. Many of the cannon had been brought over from the positions from which Ladysmith was bombarded. The advantage of surprise gained by the long march from Chieveley had been lost; more serious still was it that a large proportion of the provisions, brought at the cost of so much labour and exhaustion of the transport animals, was consumed, and what remained would be insufficient had fresh battles to be fought to capture the positions, one behind another, held by the Boers.

General Buller was the last man to retire as long as there was a hope of success. He knew that not only at home, but all over the civilized world, men were anxiously awaiting the news of his second attempt to relieve Ladysmith, and it must have been hard indeed for him to have to acknowledge a second reverse; but in spite of this he sternly determined to fall back. The movement was admirably executed; every horse, waggon, gun, and soldier was taken safely across the Tugela without hindrance by the Boers, a fact that showed how deeply they had been impressed with the valour of our soldiers. Sullenly and angrily the troops marched away. Had they had their will they would have hurled themselves against the Boer entrenchments until the last man had fallen. To them the necessities of the situation were as nothing; to

retreat seemed an acknowledgment that they had been beaten, a feeling that is seldom entertained by British soldiers. Their losses had been heavy, but there were still enough of them, they thought, for the work they had to do, and it was with a deep feeling of unmerited humiliation that they received the order to retire.

The feeling, however, was not of long endurance, for two days later, when they had settled down in camp near the Tugela and round Spearman's Farm, the general rode through the lines, congratulating the troops on the valour they had displayed, and promising them that ere long they would be in Ladysmith.

"I shall be heartily glad when we are there," Chris said when he heard what the general had promised, "not only for the sake of the town, but for our own. We are really doing no good here. It is hateful to look on when other fellows are fighting so desperately. If it were not that the orders were strict against the mounted Colonial corps going out over the country, to clear the scattered Boers out, we might be doing useful service; and as soon as Ladysmith is relieved—that is to say, if it can hold out till we get there—I should certainly vote that we come back here instead of staying with the army, and go on again on our own account."

"I quite agree with you," Carmichael said. "Still, it is something to have seen two big fights."

"Yes," Brown grumbled, "but if we tell anybody that we were there, naturally the first question will be, 'What part did you take in it?', and we shall have to own that we took no part at all, and only looked on at a distance at the other fellows fighting. I call it sickening."

"Well, never mind, Brown," Chris said; "after all, during this business we have killed twice our own number of Boers at the least, and if everyone had done as much the Boers would be pretty well extinct."

"Yes, there is certainly something in that," Brown admitted, "but if we had been allowed to scout on our own account it would be hard if we had not killed twice as many more by this time."

"We certainly might have done so, but you must remember, also, that a great many of us might have been killed too. One cannot always expect to have the luck we had in those two fights; and I am sure we should bitterly regret gaps being made in our number."

"That we should," Harris said warmly. "We were all good friends before, but nothing to what we are now after living so long together, roughing it and sharing each others' dangers. For my part I would rather go without any more fighting than that any of us should go down."

"I agree with you thoroughly, Harris," Chris said. "As most of us are likely to remain out here for life, we shall often meet, and I do hope that when we talk of these times we sha'n't have our pleasure marred by having to say how we miss so and so, and so and so. I should be sorry even to lose one of our blacks. They have stuck to their work well, and are always cheerful and willing in the worst of weather and under the most miserable conditions. I should really be very sorry if any of them were killed."

It needed but a day or two for the troops to recover their cheerfulness. It was certain that they would soon be launched against the enemy again, and it was known that General Buller

would himself command. The ground was now more known than it was before, the plans could be better laid, and all looked forward confidently to the next engagement.

No thanks were due to the weather for the renewed spirits of the men. It rained almost unceasingly. The flat ground on which the troops were encamped was a sea of mud. There was one good effect in this: there was water in all the spruits, and the men were able to indulge in a wash-up of their clothes and an occasional bath; and although they had to put their clothes on wet, they were scarcely more damp than when they took them off. There was other work to be done. Two naval guns, a mountain-battery, and some larger cannon were with great labour got up on the top of Swartz Kop.

The lads had given up the two tents allotted to them to let the rest of the men have more room, and they now felt the full benefit of their little shelter tents. The allowance throughout the rest of the camp was sixteen men to a tent. On coming in and out, as the men were muddy up to the knees, it was impossible to keep these even tolerably clean, and the discomfort of so many men crowded together, and obliged to live, eat, and sleep in such confined quarters, was very great indeed.

The lads, on the other hand, suffered from none of these inconveniences, and except that they could not stand up, and could only sit upright in the middle of the tent, they were perfectly comfortable. The tents were about seven feet wide on the ground, and as much long. Their natives had cut and brought in bundles of grass, which made them soft beds, one on each side of the tent. A blanket was stretched on each bed, another doubled lay over it. It was a strict rule that everyone

should take off his boots on entering his tent, and leave them just inside the entrance. They had purchased at the sale of the effects of some of the officers killed in action some more blankets and rugs, and these were thrown over the entrance to the front of the tents at night, and made them perfectly warm and comfortable. A trench some eighteen inches deep was dug round each tent, and this kept the floor fairly dry.

Some blankets had been given to the Kaffirs, who constructed a little shelter, in which they squatted by day and slept at night, and in which cooking operations were carried on. The lads had no occasion to feel dull, for they now knew many officers in the line regiments and among the Colonial troops, as well as the naval brigade; and "Brookfield's boys", as they were generally called, were always welcome, and it was seldom that more than half of them dined in their own camp. Chris could have always been an absentee, for the sailors had told to each other the story of his attempt to blow up the bridge at Komatipoort, and he received any number of invitations. But he by no means liked having to retell the story, and generally made some excuse or other for remaining in camp.

Another battery of artillery arrived on the 31st of January, and on the 3rd of February there were sports in the camp of the South African Light Horse, and a camp-fire sing-song afterwards. The men were all now in high spirits, for it was certain that in a day or two another attack would be made. On Sunday, February 4th, it was known that the move would commence the next day.

General Buller's plan was to make a strong feint against Brakfontein, the highest hill of the ridge connected with the

Spion Kop range, while the real attack was to be delivered against an isolated hill named Vaal Krantz, which, as viewed from Swartz Kop and Mount Alice, seemed to be the key to the whole position, and it was thought that its possession would open the way for a direct advance to Ladysmith. All was now in readiness for the attack, and the sailors had, with steel hawsers and the aid of the troops, got four more naval guns on to Swartz Kop.

Before daybreak the troops were ready to advance. The regular cavalry were near the base of Swartz Kop, while all the Colonial Horse, under Lord Dundonald, were near Potgieter's Drift. At six o'clock the cavalry went forward, but not far, for the morning was so misty that the artillery could not make out the Boer positions until an hour later, when a tremendous fire was opened from Mount Alice, Swartz Kop, and guns placed on a lower spur of Spion Kop. While this was going on, a bridge was thrown by the Engineers across another drift. Major-general Wynne led the Lancashire brigade in the direction of Brakfontein. They went forward in skirmishing order, supported by five field-batteries and the howitzer battery, all of which kept up an incessant fire of lyddite shell and shot against the Boer position, their fire being guided by an engineer officer in a balloon, who was able from a lofty altitude to signal where the Boers were clustering most thickly.

When another bridge had been completed General Lyttleton advanced with his brigade across it, and as the feint against Brakfontein had succeeded in gathering the greater portion of the Boers at the spot they supposed to be most in danger, the Lancashire brigade was withdrawn, retiring in excellent

order, the movement being covered by an incessant firing of the guns with them, which completely dominated those of the Boers. Lyttleton's brigade now pressed forward under a storm of musketry and shell from machine and other guns, which were answered even more thunderously by the British artillery. The din was tremendous—greater even than any that had been previously heard. It seemed impossible that men could live for a moment in such a storm of missiles. But they pressed on unfalteringly, and the batteries with them as steadily maintained their fire, though shells fell continually round and among them. The batteries that had gone out with the Lancashire Brigade now directed their fire against Vaal Krantz, having moved across from Brakfontein under a tremendous fire. One of the waggons lost all its horses; but the five artillerymen with it manned the wheels and brought it safely out of fire.

At three o'clock Lyttleton's brigade advanced in earnest, and dashed forward at the double against Vaal Krantz, heedless of the rifle fire from the hills on both flanks and from the front. The defenders soon lost courage, as they saw the Durhams and 3rd King's Royal Rifles dashing up the hill with bayonets fixed, and scarce two hundred of them remained till the British gained the crest. These were speedily scattered or bayoneted.

The position when won was found to be unsatisfactory, for it was dominated by a hill beyond, which could not be seen from the British look-out stations, and the cannon on Spion Kop were able to sweep the plateau. At one time the Boers gathered and made an effort to retake the hill, but two more battalions were sent up to reinforce the defenders, and the

enemy were driven back and the fire gradually languished. The troops remained on the ground they had won during the night. From prisoners they learned that four thousand Boers occupied Doornkloof, the hill on their flank, and that the whole of the Transvaalers under Joubert were gathering in their front.

The baggage-waggons were all collected by the river in readiness to advance; but the way was not yet sufficiently cleared for them, and the Boer guns on Brakfontein and Spion Kop commanded the road which they would have to traverse. It was evident to all that no advance was possible until the guns on these heights had been silenced or captured. For the same reason the two brigades of cavalry had remained inactive. During the night the Boers set fire to the grass on Vaal Krantz, and by the assistance of the light kept up a shell and Maxim fire upon the troops holding it. By morning they had brought up one of their big hundred-pound Creusot guns on to Doornkloof, and it added its roar to the chaos of other sounds. Under the shelter of its fire and that of the other guns the Boers made several attempts to recapture the hill, but were smartly repulsed each time they advanced.

All day Tuesday and Wednesday the uproar of battle never ceased. We could advance no farther. The Boers could not drive us back, although they made a very determined night attack on Hildyard's brigade. That afternoon General Buller held a council of war, at which all the generals were present. Their opinions were unanimous that the Boer position could not be forced without terrible loss, and that when they arrived at Ladysmith they would but add to the number shut up in that town, as it might be found as difficult to force their

way out as to arrive there. General Hart pleaded to be allowed to make an attempt on Doornkloof with his brigade; but, strongly held as that position was, it was deemed impossible that it could be captured by a single brigade. The original intention was that guns should be taken up on to Vaal Krantz, and that with their assistance a strong force would wheel round and take Doornkloof in the rear; but, owing to the discovery that the former hill was dominated from several points, it was found impracticable to carry the plan into execution. Orders were therefore given for the supply column, which had advanced some distance, to retire.

As the movement was being carried out, the Boers kept up a heavy fire upon the waggons and on the hospital, which, relying upon the protection of the Red Cross flag, had advanced within range, but here, as upon almost every occasion, the enemy paid no respect whatever to the Geneva emblem, although when, as once or twice happened, one of our shells fell near an ambulance of theirs, they had sent in indignant protests against our conduct. All that night and the next day the movement to the rear continued, and not only were the infantry moved across the Tugela, but the guns on Swartz Kop and Mount Alice were removed, and orders were given for a general retirement to Springfield, a proof that the next attack would be made in an entirely different direction.

CHAPTER XVI

A COLONIST'S ADVENTURE

ON the morning after the battle orders were issued for the greater part of the troops to return to Chieveley, and among the first to leave were the Maritzburg Scouts. They were heartily glad to be off. During the three preceding days the position of the cavalry had been a galling one. They had seen nothing of the fighting, being kept down at Potgieter's Drift in readiness to advance the moment that orders came. They had nothing to do but to stand or sit down near their horses, watching the fire from the enemy's batteries on the hills, and the bursting of our lyddite shells among them, the outburst of brownish-yellow smoke rendering them easily distinguishable from the sudden puffs of white vapour caused by the explosion of the shrapnel shells of the artillery. How the battle was going was only known from the wounded men brought down from the front. The reports at first were encouraging, but it became evident on the following days that no progress was being made.

Each evening when the sun set both the colonial and regular cavalry returned to their camp, for it was certain that they could not act at night. When it became known on Wednesday evening that a retreat was ordered, the news came almost as a relief, for the suspense had been very trying.

After dinner Chris went into the tent where the officers of the troop were gathered. As usual, the talk was of the battle, but in a short time Captain Brookfield said:

"Let us try and get away from the subject. We have talked of nothing else for the past three days, and I defy anyone to say anything new about it; it is not a pleasant subject either. Richards, you were in the last war, I know, and took part in the defence of Standerton. Suppose you tell us about that; it is one of the few pleasant memories of that time."

"I don't know that there is much to tell you about it, but I will let you know how I came to take share in it. That was an exciting time for me, for I was never so near rubbed out in all my life. Just before the last business broke out I happened to be returning from Pretoria, intending to sell for anything that I could get a large farm that I owned in the Leydenburg district. Of late the Boers had been getting so offensive in their manner that I thought something would come of it, and made up my mind to sell out at any price and return to Natal. When I rode into Leydenburg I found that two hundred and fifty men of the 94th Regiment were starting next day with a large train of waggons for Pretoria. As I was frequently in the town, and had made the acquaintance of several of the officers, I thought it would be pleasant to ride down with them, as it made no difference whether I got into Pretoria a day or two earlier or later. The general idea was that war would come of it, but no one thought it would begin without the usual notice and warning.

"I told the officers that I would not trust the Boers further than I could see them, for that a more treacherous set of fellows are not to be found on the surface of the earth. Still, I must own that I had no more idea that an attack would be made upon us than they had. Well, you all know what came

of it. We were going along a hollow with rising ground on either side when, without the slightest warning, a tremendous fire was opened from both flanks. It can hardly be said that there was any resistance. The troops were strung out along the line of waggons; numbers were shot down before a single musket was fired in defence. The main body, such as it was, fought stoutly, but as they could only catch an occasional glimpse of the heads of the enemy, while they were themselves altogether exposed, there could be but one end to it. A hundred and twenty men were killed or wounded in a few minutes, and to save the rest from a similar massacre the officer who commanded surrendered.

"I fired a few shots at first, but as soon as I saw how it would end I rode for it. I was with the rear-guard when the firing began, and so took the back track. As soon as the firing ceased I saw half a dozen Boers galloping after me. My blood was up, as you may imagine, and on getting to a dip I jumped off my horse, left it in shelter, and threw myself down on the crest of the hollow, and as they came within range I picked off the one who was nearest to me. That brought the others up with a round turn. They retired a little way, then dismounted and separated, and proceeded to stalk me. We exchanged shots for an hour or two. I killed another, and got, as you see by this scar on my cheek, a graze. However, I think they would have tired of the game first. But suddenly I saw a dozen Boers galloping across the country in our direction. They were doubtless a party who had arrived too late to take part in the fight, if you can call such a treacherous massacre a fight, and, hearing the sound of shots, were riding to see what was going on.

"I saw that things were getting too hot, and ran down to my horse again and rode along in the hollow, which fortunately hid me from the sight of either the men I had been fighting or those riding up. I had therefore about a quarter of a mile start when I heard a shout, and knew that they were after me. After what had happened I did not dare ride for Middleburg, as there was no saying whether that place might not have already risen; so there was nothing to depend upon but the speed and bottom of my horse. It was a fairly good animal, but nothing particular. It had had an easy time of it while on the march, for we had only done some fourteen or fifteen miles a day. I might have had hopes that I should outride the men in pursuit of me, but they would be joined by more men on fresh horses from any Boer farmhouse or village we came near. Besides, the news of this intended attack on the convoy must have been known far and wide. Occasionally a shot was fired, but as I was riding at a gallop, and the Boers were doing the same, I had no great fear of being hit. I gained a little at first, but after two hours' riding they were about the same distance behind as when they had first started on the chase.

"I felt that my horse was beginning to fag a bit, but the sun was setting, for the attack had taken place in the afternoon. I kept on till it was too dark for me to make out my pursuers, some of whom were not more than three hundred yards behind me; then, while my horse was going at full gallop I leapt off without checking him, a trick that most hunters can do. I chose the spot because I could make out that there was some low scrub close to the road. Stooping among this I ran forward. I was glad to hear that my horse

was still galloping at the top of his speed, and, deprived of my weight, would probably get a good bit farther before he was taken, if he did but keep on. This I hoped he would do, for he had evidently entered into the spirit of the chase, and had laid back his ears whenever the Boers raised their voices in a yell or a rifle was fired. They were yelling pretty hard when they passed me, urging their horses on in the belief that the chase was almost at an end. I heard no more of the Boers that time, for as soon as they had gone on I ran at the top of my speed for some distance, and then broke into a trot, and by the morning must have been thirty miles away.

"I decided to make for Standerton, for there I felt sure I should be safe, for at that place was a considerable English population, and they would certainly hold out. I had a Colt's rifle with me and a brace of revolvers, for even when I went down to Leydenburg I heard that several Englishmen had been maltreated, and one or two shot by Boers they met. I tramped for four days, and as the attack on our troops had been made on the 20th of December, it was now Christmas-eve. I had not ventured to go near a Boer farm, for fortunately I had shot a springbok, and was therefore under no trouble as to food; but on the previous day I had not come across water, and the heat was terrible, so I felt that whatever came of it I must go and ask for a drink. I saw a farmhouse about nine in the morning and made for it. As I approached, a woman came out of the door and, seeing me, re-entered, and two Boers with their guns in their hands ran out.

"'Who are you?' they shouted. Of course I speak Dutch as well as English, and shouted back that I only wanted some water.

"'Are you an Englishman?' they shouted again.

"'Yes, I am,' I said; 'but what difference does that make?' I saw their guns go up to their shoulders, and flung myself down, and their shots went over my head. It was my turn now, and I fired twice, and the two Boers rolled over. I walked forward now ready to fire on an instant, as there might be more of them. Some women ran out, but no man, and I went straight up. They were screaming over the bodies of the men, and heaped curses on me as I came up. I slung my rifle behind me, and taking out my pistols I said, 'Your men brought it on themselves. I only asked for water, and they fired at me. I don't want to hurt any of you, but if you attack me I must protect myself.'

"Several times I thought they would have done so, but the sight of my pistols cowed them. I walked straight into the house, dipped a pannikin into a pail of water, took a long drink, then I filled my water-bottle, and went out. Though they cursed me again, they did not attempt to stop me, as I rather feared they would; but I understood it when, before I had gone fifty yards, I heard a horse's hoofs, and, looking round, saw a girl riding at full speed across the veldt. She had no doubt gone to fetch the men who were away, or to the next farm to summon assistance. The draught of water had done me a world of good, and I soon broke into a run, though I did not conceal from myself that I was in a bad fix. Once out of sight of the farm I changed my course, and did so several times in the course of the next two hours; then, on getting to the crest of high ground, I saw a river half a mile away. This, I felt sure, was Groot Spruit. Before starting to walk down I looked round, and a little over a mile away

could see a party of some fifteen Boers. I ran at full speed down the slope, and could see no other place where I could make a fight of it; but many of the rivers have, like those here, steep banks, and I could at least sell my life dearly. It could only be for a time, for some of the Boers would cross the spruit and take me in rear. Still, there was nothing else to be done.

"When I reached the bank I gave a shout of satisfaction. The river was in flood; there must have been rain up in the hills, and you know how quickly the streams rise. Unless the Boers knew of some very shallow place, there would be no crossing it, for it was running like a mill-stream, and except at some waggon drift the banks were almost perpendicular. At any rate I could not hope to swim half across before the Boers came up, and so I must fight it out where I was. I had scarcely found a point where I could get a comfortable foothold on the bank, with my head just above the level, when the Boers appeared on the top of the hill. They stopped for a minute and then broke up, and, scattering, rode forward. They felt sure that I must have made for the river, as there was no other place where I could be concealed. When they came within a couple of hundred yards of it they dismounted, and three or four came forward on foot. When the nearest was within a hundred yards of me I fired.

"At so short a distance, and with so good a rest, I could not miss, and before the smoke cleared away I winged another, and the rest ran back hastily. I sent a shot or two among them as they were consulting, with the result that they rode off three or four hundred yards farther back. They did not attempt to return my fire, for, except when I raised my

head for a moment, they could see nothing of me. They doubtless learned from the women that I had a Colt's rifle and a brace of revolvers, and that if they were to make a rush across the open not many of them were likely to reach me. After a talk two or three of them mounted their horses and rode so as to strike the river both above and below me, intending, no doubt, to cross if they found a place where there was a chance of doing so. I felt pretty sure that they would do nothing till it was dark, then they would crawl up and make a rush; I was certain, anyhow, that they would not give it up, as there were two of their number lying on the veldt besides the two at the farmhouse. There was, however, more pluck in them than I had given them credit for, for about mid-day they began to advance, crawling along the ground as if stalking a quarry.

"The men who had gone out on horseback had all returned, but just as the others started crawling up three of them galloped away down-stream. I determined at once to shift my position a bit, so as to put off the evil hour. I pulled a stone as big as my head out of the clay of the bank and put it on the edge where my head had been, and then got down into the water. It was waist-deep at a couple of feet from the bank, which above was too steep to walk along. I had gone a hundred yards when I saw, seven or eight inches above the water-level, a hole, and pushing my arm in I found it was a place where a good bit of the bank had caved in. Laying my gun and pistols down on a ledge I felt about farther. At the top it went in nearly three feet, and was higher at the back than it was at the water's edge. At any rate it afforded a good chance of safety. Holding the

revolvers, the chamber of the rifle, and my ammunition above-water, I stooped until I could get into the hole, which was but just wide enough for the purpose; then I pushed myself back to the end. I found there was just height enough for me to sit with my mouth above-water. The back sloped so that I had to dig my heels into the clay to prevent myself from slipping forward.

"It was not a comfortable position, but that was a secondary consideration. I had noticed as I came along that the river was already falling, so that I had no fear of being drowned as long as I kept my position. With some trouble I fastened my pistols and ammunition on the brim of my hat; the rifle I was holding between my knees. There I sat hour after hour. Fortunately, being pretty near midsummer day, the water was not cold. I had at least the consolation of knowing what a state of fury the Boers must be in. They would have seen by my footsteps where I had entered the river, just below where I had been standing. No doubt they would have gone along the top of the bank to see if I had come out of the water again, and when they reached their friends on horseback and heard that I had not swum down the river, they would have concluded that I must have been drowned. Had I managed to cross, they would have seen me climb the opposite bank.

"In an hour the water had fallen to my shoulders, and when it became dark it was but waist-deep where I was sitting. To make a long story short, by midnight the water was below my feet and still falling rapidly. I waited a couple of hours and then started to cross. It was about fifty yards wide, and I was fully half-way over before it reached my chin. The stream had lost much of its force, and I had no difficulty

in swimming across the rest of the way, though the water was deep until I was within a couple of yards of the bank. Then I climbed the bank and made off. I saw nothing more of my pursuers, and three days later I arrived at Standerton, and remained there till the end of the war, for the gallant little town repulsed all attempts of the Boers to capture it."

"That was a narrow escape indeed, Richards," Captain Brookfield said. "If you hadn't had your wits about you the Boers would certainly have got you. It was a first-rate hiding-place, but I don't think many of us would have thought of adopting it. Now, will someone else give us a yarn?"

Two or three more stories were told, and then the party broke up, feeling all the better for having for an hour avoided the standing topic. Two days later all were settled at Chieveley again, and it was generally believed that the next attack would take place very shortly, and that it would probably be directed against Colenso. That evening a farmer came into camp. His horse had dropped dead a mile away. He stopped, as he passed through the tents of the scouts, and asked where he could find the general. Captain Brookfield, who heard the question, stepped out from his tent with Chris, to whom he had been talking.

"Why, Searle, is it you? I thought the voice was familiar to me. What is it?"

"I have ridden in to get help. The other day a raiding party of Boers came down through Inadi, and riding in between Dingley Dell and Botha's Castle—you know the hill—swept off a quantity of cattle. They have not penetrated so far before, and no one about thought that there was any danger

while you were attacking them up here. One of the farmers rode to Greytown for help. Most of the young men there had joined one or other of the colonial troops, but fifteen of us said that we would go out. It seemed that there were not more than some fifteen or twenty Boers. Well, I can't tell you all about it, for, as it is a matter of life and death, I have not a moment to lose. However, we came up to them north of Botha's Castle. We had a sharp fight. Two of our men were killed and five of the Boers; the rest rode off. We set to work to bunch all the cattle, and as we were at it we were attacked suddenly by a party sixty or seventy strong. The fellows that we had driven off had evidently come across them and brought them down upon us. We made a running fight, but our horses were not so fresh as theirs; and seeing that they had the speed of us we made for an empty farmhouse, and as they rode up we brought down several of them.

"There was a wall round the yard, and the Boers drew off for a bit to consider. Then they dismounted and planted themselves round the house in such shelter as they could find within two or three hundred yards, and the affair began in earnest. The first day they kept up a heavy fire, to which we could make but little reply, for it was certain death to lift a head above the wall or to show one's self at a window even for a moment. We lost three men that way. During the night they tried to carry the place, but we were all at the wall, and had the best of it, as we had only to show our heads, while they were altogether exposed. There was not much firing next day, and it was evident that they meant to starve us out. There was not a scrap of food to be found in the place; but fortunately there was a small thatched kraal

inside the yard which gave some forage for the horses. The next day we killed one of them for food.

"That night we agreed that when the Boers saw that we did not surrender in a day or two they would be sure that we must be eating the horses, as any food we brought with us must be exhausted, and they would then make a determined attack; for we knew we had killed eight or ten of them, and that they would not go away. So we decided that the only hope was for one of us to ride here; we tossed up who should try to get through the Boers, and the lot fell upon me. I took the best of the horses. We had agreed from the first that this would have to be done, and had given what scraps of bread we could spare to it; besides which, they were all in fair condition, as the yard was strewn with rubbish, and some party of Boers had ripped up all the beds and straw mattresses and scattered the contents about.

"Some of them were sure to be on watch, and I rode at a walk. I made for the north, as that side was less likely to be watched. I had gone about two hundred yards when a man jumped up just in front of me. My rifle was ready, and before he could lift his I shot him, and then clapped spurs to my horse. There was a tremendous hubbub; shots were fired at random in all directions, but I doubt whether they could have seen me after I had gone fifty yards. I rode for a quarter of a mile due north, and then turned west. I had no fear of being overtaken, for although the Boers would all have their horses close, in readiness to mount if we should try to break out, I must have got a good quarter of a mile start, and they were not likely to keep up the chase long, as they could not tell which way I might

have doubled, and if they pursued far, it would be in the direction of Greytown. It was about a seventy-mile ride, and as I started about twelve, I have done it in nine hours. I foundered the horse, but fortunately he did not drop till I was within half a mile of the camp. Now, where can I find the general?"

"You will find him at Frere, but I am afraid it will be of no use. We have tried him again and again—at least, one or other of us has done so—to let us go out scouting, but he will not hear of it, though the whole of us Colonials are terribly sore at leaving the whole country at the mercy of the Boer marauders; and now that we shall probably be at work here again directly, he is less likely than ever to let anyone go."

"You can't go without orders, I suppose?"

Captain Brookfield shook his head. "We are just as much under orders as the regular troops are, and it would be a serious matter indeed to fly in the face of his repeated orders on this subject."

The farmer made a gesture of despair.

"Captain Brookfield," Chris said, speaking for the first time, "I think that by the terms of our enlistment in your corps we were to be allowed to take our discharge whenever we asked for it?"

"That was so Chris, but—"

"Then I beg now, sir, to tender our resignation from the present moment."

"But, Chris, you have but twenty men, and by what Searle says there are sixty or seventy of them."

"Of whom ten or so have been killed. Well, sir, we have fought against nearly a hundred before now, and got the best

of it; besides, we shall have the help of the little party shut up. However, now that we have resigned, that is our affair. I suppose that if we rejoin you, you will have no objection to re-enlist us?"

Captain Brookfield smiled. "I should have no objection certainly, Chris, but General Buller might have."

"I don't suppose he will know of our having been away, sir; he has plenty more serious things to think of than the numerical strength of your troop, and as the news of a skirmish some thirty miles north of Greytown is not likely to be reported in the papers, or at any rate to attract his attention, I don't think you need trouble yourself on that score. Besides, if it was reported, it could only be said that one of the besieged party, escaping, returned with a small body of volunteers he had collected; and the name of the Maritzburg Scouts would not be mentioned. I am sure that Mr. Searle would impress the necessity for silence about that point, on his friends."

"Well, I accept your resignation, Chris; a headstrong man will have his way; and indeed I have great faith in your accomplishing, somehow, the relief of this party."

The farmer had listened with surprise to this discussion between the lad and Captain Brookfield. The latter now turned to him and said:

"This young gentleman is the commander of twenty lads of about his own age. They have been in two serious fights, and in both cases against a Boer force much superior to themselves in numbers, and I have as much confidence in them as in any men in my troop. They are all good shots, and admirably mounted, and you can be perfectly sure of them, and can take

my assurance that if any twenty men can relieve your friends, they will do so."

"Will you be able to ride back again with us, sir? I can mount you."

"Certainly I can, if my friend Captain Brookfield can furnish me with a meal before I start."

"That I will with much pleasure. How long will it be before you are ready, Chris?"

"Half an hour, sir. I left them all rubbing down their horses when I came in here a quarter of an hour ago, and it will take but a very short time to pack up and start."

"Very well; I dare say that Mr. Searle will be ready by that time. Breakfast shall be ready for you in ten minutes, Searle, and while you are eating it I will tell you enough of these gentlemen's doings to reassure you, for I see that you do not feel very confident that they will be able to tackle the Boers."

"After what you have said, Captain Brookfield, I can have no doubt that they will do all they can, but it seems to me that twenty men—or twenty boys—are no match for fifty or sixty Boers."

While they were speaking, Chris had returned to his camp. The lads were all engaged in rubbing up their saddlery.

"You can knock off at once," Chris said; "I have need for you. You no longer belong to the Maritzburg Scouts."

There was a general exclamation of astonishment.

"What do you mean, Chris?"

"I mean that I have resigned in my own name and yours, and Captain Brookfield has accepted the resignation."

"Are you really in earnest, Chris?"

"Very much so; but I will not keep you in suspense. A small party of Greytown men are besieged near Botha's Castle; one of them has just ridden in for help. But you know well enough that Buller will not hear of detached parties going out all over the country; and Captain Brookfield told the farmer that it was of no use his going to the general, and that none of the Colonial troops could leave the camp without orders. As it was evident that there was nothing more to be done, and we could not leave the man's friends to be massacred, the only thing to do was to give in our resignation at once; and of course, now that it is done and accepted, we are at liberty to mount and ride off where we please. When we have done our work we will come back and re-enlist, and no one will be any the wiser. We shall start in half an hour. We need not take the tent poles, or anything but a blanket and a waterproof sheet."

There was lively satisfaction at the news that they were again going to be employed in what they considered their proper work.

"What shall we do about the men and stores?" Willesden asked; "you know that those two big boxes of the things we ordered at Maritzburg arrived yesterday."

"I think, Willesden, we will take Jack and the two Zulus, and leave Japhet and the Swazis here in charge of the stores, and blankets, and other things we leave behind us. Captain Brookfield will keep an eye on them for us. The farmer is going to ride back with us on one of the spare horses, and the three natives can ride the others. There is a hundredweight of biscuits in the sack that came with the boxes; each of us can take five pounds in his saddle-bag, a tin of cocoa and milk, and a pound or two of bacon. Jack can take a kettle and frying-pan, and the natives their blankets and twenty

pounds of mealie flour for themselves and five times as much mealies for the horses. We can get them at the stores that were opened a few days ago."

Some of the men from the other tents walked over on seeing the tents pulled down and the waterproof sheets and blankets rolled up, and asked: "Where are you fellows off to?"

"We have resigned; we are sick of doing nothing."

As it was known that they drew neither pay nor rations, the news did not create much surprise.

"You are lucky fellows," one said. "We get no share of the fighting and a full share of the hardships; still, I wonder you do not stop till we are in Ladysmith."

"When is that going to be?" Field asked innocently. "We have been told that we shall be in Ladysmith in a week many times since we first came up here in the middle of December, and we are no nearer now than when we arrived here. Do you think that you could guarantee that we should be there in another week? because, if so, we might put off going."

The trooper shook his head with a laugh.

"That is a question no man in camp can answer," he said. "Perhaps in a week, perhaps in a fortnight, perhaps," he added more gravely, "never. We know by the messages they flash out that they are nearly at the end of their food, and if we don't get there in a fortnight or thereabout, our motive for going on may be at an end. In that case I suppose we shall wait here till Roberts has relieved Kimberley and marches on Bloemfontein. That will send all the Free Staters scurrying back in a hurry, and even the Transvaalers will begin to think that it is time to go. Then I suppose we shall advance and clear Natal out."

"Well, perhaps we may be back again to help you by that time," Field answered; "but we are heartily tired of this place,

and of watching the Boers making their positions stronger and stronger every day."

"It is about the same with us all," the trooper grumbled, "and I for one wish that I could go down with you to Maritzburg and have a week off. It would be such a comfort to sleep in a dry bed and to dress in dry clothes, that I doubt whether I should ever have the strength of mind to come back again. I wish that the general would issue an order dismounting us all and filling up the gaps in the line regiments with us. Then at least we should have a chance of fighting, which does not seem likely ever to come to us here. You are not going to leave those big boxes behind you, are you?"

"Yes, we are going to leave them in the care of the captain, with a note saying that if we do not turn up again before Ladysmith is relieved, they are to be handed over to the poor beggars there."

"There is one thing I cannot say, and that is that we have been short of food, for the Army Service Corps has done splendidly, and no one has ever been hungry for an hour, except when on a long march or engaged in a battle. If everything had been worked as well, we should certainly have no reason whatever to complain. If I were my own master, and could afford it, I would go down to Durban and take a passage for myself and my horse for Port Elizabeth, and then go up and enlist in one of the yeomanry corps with Roberts. When he once starts there will be plenty of movement on that side; while here, even if we get to Ladysmith, we may be fixed there for no one can say how long. You see what it is here, and if the Boers don't lose heart, and defend the Biggarsberg and the Drakensberg, we shall find at least as much difficulty there as we shall here. It is quite certain that the Ladysmith men will take a long time to recover from what they have gone through; and as for the cavalry, I fancy their horses

have been eaten. If they had been out here with us, instead of being cooped up in there, we should have been able to make it hot for the Boers when they retire, and to keep them on the run, but with so small a force as we have we should hardly be able to do so. Besides, they have so many lines of retreat. The Free Staters can go over to the left to Van Reenen and the other passes; another commando can go east; there are plenty of fords on the Buffalo; and they would retire on Vryheid, while the main body could make a stand at the Biggarsberg; and as they always seem able to carry their cannon off with them, our cavalry could do nothing without artillery and infantry."

There had been no pause in the work of preparation while they were talking, and the horses were now saddled, the food divided, the saddle-bags packed, and the blankets and waterproofs strapped on. Chris went across to Captain Brookfield's tent.

"We are all ready for a start, sir."

The officer looked at his watch. "It is three minutes under the half-hour, Chris. How much ammunition are you taking with you?"

"A hundred and fifty rounds each, sir, of which I don't suppose we shall use above ten at the outside. Still, there is never any saying; and if we should get besieged we shall want it all. Your horse is ready for you, Mr. Searle."

"And I am ready too," the farmer said, getting up from the table and stretching himself. "I ought not to have sat down. I could ride as far as most at twenty, but I have not done so much for the last fifteen years, and I feel stiff in every limb. However, I shall be all right when I have gone a few miles, and that wash I had before breakfast has done me a world of good. Now, sir, I am ready, and whether we shall succeed or not, I thank you with all my heart for coming with me."

"Good-bye, Chris!" Captain Brookfield said. "I expect you will all turn up again, like bad pennies, before many days have gone."

"I hope so, sir," Chris said. "I should be sorry to miss the end here after having seen it so far."

CHAPTER XVII

A RESCUE

WHEN Chris went out with Captain Brookfield and the farmer, the lads had shaken hands with all their friends, and were standing by the side of their horses ready to mount. Jack and the two Zulus were standing a few yards behind them. Japhet had brought up the other spare horse.

"It is a nice piece of horse-flesh," the farmer said as he looked at it critically.

"Yes, it was bred by Duncan. We purchased pretty well the pick of those he brought down the country."

"That accounts for it. They are in good condition, too."

"Yes; our horses all get two feeds of mealies a-day, or, when it is wet, one feed of mealies and a hot mash made of mealie flour, besides what they can pick up, for we don't draw horse rations. Now, sir, we will be off;" and he gave the word "Mount!"

The lads all in a second swung into their saddles.

"Good-bye, lads, and good luck!" Captain Brookfield said; and the men standing by broke into a hearty cheer.

There was a strong suspicion that the party were not going down to Maritzburg. It was felt that they were not the sort to throw it up before Ladysmith was relieved. And their

suspicions were heightened when they saw the farmer mount and ride by the side of Chris.

"It is all gammon about their resigning, is it not, Brookfield?" one of the officers said, as they stood looking after them. "Why should they have left two of their men here with some of their traps and stores if they had not been coming back? They would naturally give them all away. Besides, I noticed that farmer come in on foot half an hour ago; there was no talk of their leaving before he arrived, and he has gone off with them on one of their horses."

Captain Brookfield smiled.

"All I know about it officially is that this morning Mr. King resigned in the name of himself and his party; and as you know, I told you when they first joined us, they did so on the explicit understanding that they should be allowed to resign when they chose, and that provision was inserted when they were sworn in."

"That is all you know officially?"

"Yes. If they are missed, and the question is asked me what has become of them, that is the answer I shall give. What else I know I must for the present keep to myself."

"I suppose we shall see them back soon?"

"Well, I consider that that is within the limits of possibility."

"I suppose that you have formed no plan yet, Mr. King?" the farmer said, when they had left the camp.

"No; my present idea is to follow the line half-way down to Frere. If we were to strike off towards the country at once, we should, of course, be noticed; so I would rather get three miles on. You say it is about seventy miles?"

"About that."

"Well, allowing for a halt, we can do it in twelve hours; that would be just as it is getting dark. Of course we shall

not show ourselves till they begin to attack the house. I hope we shall find your friends still holding out."

"I hope so indeed. You see, the Boers were quiet when I started, and I should hardly think that they would make an attack again after I left. They seemed to have settled down to starve us out; but it is quite possible that now I have got away they will grow nervous lest I should bring help up, and are very likely to make another attempt this evening. They would be pretty sure to succeed this time, for there are only seven of us left there; and though they could make a good fight in daylight, they would have no real chance if the Boers went at them in earnest, which they are sure to do next time. We agreed before I started that it would not do to try to defend the yard. After I left they were going to pile everything movable against the doors and windows and fight hard to keep the Boers out, and would then go upstairs and sell their lives dearly."

"How far are the Boer horses out?"

"About five hundred yards away, in a dip. We know they always keep three or four men on guard there, for we have seen them come out of the hollow sometimes."

"And the cattle, have they driven them off yet?"

"Yes; four of the Boers and twenty or thirty natives went straight on with them as soon as they had driven us into the farmhouse. I am afraid there is no use thinking of getting them back."

"It depends upon how far they have gone," Chris said. "The rains have brought the grass up, and as likely as not they may halt when they get to some good pastures and wait till the others join them. It is not likely that all that gang came from one place."

"I expect that they have been gathered up from lonely farmhouses where they have escaped the commandos, and

they will want to divide their plunder between them; they don't trust each other a bit, and each would cheat his fellows of his share if he could. So I should think that what you suggest is likely enough, and that it has been arranged to wait when they come to a good place till the others arrive. But you are not thinking of rescuing them, are you?"

"If we thrash the Boers at the farm I shall certainly have a try. We did carry off two or three thousand head about two months ago from the hands of at least as large a party as this, and I don't see why we should not do it again. It was near Mount Umhlumba."

"Was it your party that did that?" the farmer exclaimed. "Why, it was the talk of the whole district, and some of the cattle belonged to a friend of mine. He told me how he had been saved from ruin. Well, sir, after that I shall feel more confident than I acknowledge I have been up to now. Captain Brookfield told me about your going into the Boer camp in disguise, and to Komati-poort, and how you surprised a party of Boers looting a farm near Dundee; but he did not mention that. In fact, he had only just finished telling me the other affairs when you came in saying that you were ready to start. Well, well, it is wonderful that a party of young gentlemen like yours should have done such things!"

They did not hurry their horses, but for the most part went at the steady canter to which the animals were most accustomed; occasionally they would walk for a bit.

At Weenan, where they crossed the Bushman river, they halted for half an hour, and for double that time after crossing the Mooi at Intembeni; then as the sun began to lose its power they went fast, until, when they reached one of the farthest spurs of Botha's Castle, the farmer said:

"When we get over the next rise we shall see the house."

Chris gave the order to dismount, and, going forward on foot, they threw themselves down when close to the crest, and crawled forward until they obtained a fair view. Sankey and Chris were again provided with glasses, having bought them on the day before starting at the sale of the effects of several officers who had fallen in a fight at Vaal Krantz, and all gazed intently for some time at the house.

"Thank God they are all right so far!" Chris said to the farmer. "I can see the Boers lying all round the house, and that dark clump is their horses; so our ride has not been in vain. I suppose it is about a mile and a half from here. I don't see the gate into the yard. Which side is it?"

"That corner of the house hides it. It is on the eastern side."

"It will be quite dark in an hour; when it is so, we will move down a bit farther, then we will halt till we hear them attacking. We must not go nearer, for the moon will be up by that time. If I had known that we should have got here before dark, we need not have troubled to bring the Zulus. I intended to send them forward to see how matters stood, then they could have guided us right up to the gate. However, as they have all got guns, and can shoot, it will add to the panic our attack will create, and they will all be pleased at the chance of at last getting a shot at the Boers. They were complaining to me the other day that they were very happy in all other respects, but they were very much disappointed at not having had a fight."

The natives were indeed delighted when, on Chris rejoining them, he told them that they should take their share in the attack on the Boers. Chris and his friends all threw themselves on the ground, after sending up Jack to the crest to keep watch. But the farmer said, "I dare not lie down; if I did, I should never get up again."

He had, indeed, to be lifted off his horse when they dismounted.

"I can quite understand that," Chris said. "I feel stiff and tired myself, and you must be almost made of iron to have ridden one hundred and forty miles almost without halting."

"If anyone had told me that I could do it, I should not have believed him. Of course one is on horseback a good many hours a day. Often, after going round the farm, I start at two or three o'clock and ride into Greytown and back; but that is only a matter of some fifteen miles each way. Still, when one has got seven men's lives depending upon one, one makes a big effort."

"I tell you what, Mr. Searle. The best thing you can do is to strip and lie down. I will set the two Zulus to knead you. You will find yourself quite a new man after it."

"That is a good idea, King, and I will adopt it."

For half an hour the two men rubbed and kneaded the farmer's muscles from head to foot, exerting themselves until the perspiration streamed from them. Then one of them brought up one of the water-skins and poured the contents over him.

"That has certainly done me a world of good," the farmer said when he had dressed himself. "I don't say the stiffness has all gone, but I certainly don't feel any worse than I did when I got to your camp. I should never have thought of it myself."

"It is what is done after a Turkish bath," Chris said. "I have had them often at Johannesburg. The natives do something of the same sort. They make a little hut of boughs, and fill a hole in the middle with hot stones and pour water over them, and steam themselves, and I believe get rubbed too."

As soon as they considered it dark enough to be perfectly

safe, they led their horses down until they judged that they were within half a mile of the house, then dismounted and waited. Chris had already made all the arrangements. Carmichael, who was the leader for the time being of one of the sections of five, was with his party to ride straight for the Boers' horses directly the attack began. The firing at the house would act as a guide to the spot where they were placed, and he was, if possible, to attack them from behind. He was to shoot down the guards, but not to pursue them if the horses bolted on hearing the attack on the house.

"What you have to do is to stampede them," Chris said. "As soon as you have got them on the run, keep them going, and if they scatter, do you scatter too. The Boers without their horses will be at our mercy. Don't stop till you have driven them five miles away. Then you can halt till morning. As you come back, you are likely enough to hear firing, and can then ride towards it and join us. But don't get within rifle-shot of the Boers. I don't want any lives thrown away. If you hear three shots at regular intervals during the night ride towards the sound. I may want you here."

It was just ten o'clock when there was a violent outburst of fire at the farmhouse, and all sprung into their saddles.

"Now, Carmichael, do you gallop on. Get as close as you can to the horses without being observed. Go at a walk the last hundred yards or so; the horse guards are not likely to hear you, they are sure to be up on the edge of the dip watching the farm. Stay quiet till you hear our yell, and then go straight in to them. In that case you may manage without their getting a shot at you, for as likely as not they will have strolled up without their rifles."

As soon as Carmichael's little party had started, Chris moved on with the rest at a walk.

"There is no occasion to hurry," he said. "It will take the

Boers some time to force their way in, and the hotter they are at work the less likely they will be to hear us."

In two or three minutes he ordered them to canter. "It is of no use charging; I expect that they are all inside the yard." It was, however, at a fast pace that they rode up towards the wall. Chris blew his whistle, and the cheer of the whites and the war-cry of the two Zulus burst out at the top of their voices.

"Give it to them hot, lads!" Chris shouted, for the benefit of the Boers. "Kill every man-jack of the scoundrels!" And at once nineteen rifles opened upon the dark figures clustered round the house. "Use your magazines," Chris shouted again. "Don't let a man of them get off."

Appalled by the sudden attack, ignorant of the number of their assailants, and mown down by the terrible fire, the Boers on the two sides of the house exposed to it did not think of resistance, but all who could do so made a rush round to the other sides, and, joining their companions there, clambered over the wall and made for their horses; but these had already gone. As Chris had anticipated, the four guards were watching the farmhouse, and did not hear the approach of Carmichael's party. As Chris's whistle sounded these galloped forward, and at their volley three of the Boers fell, the other fled. At once with loud shouts they charged in among the ponies, who were already kicking and plunging at the sudden sound of firearms. A minute later they were all in full flight, followed by the five lads shouting and yelling. The firing had been unnoticed by the Boers round the house, and these, when on arriving at the hollow they found their horses gone, gave vent to their alarm and rage in many strange oaths, and then scattered in flight all over the country.

"It is of no use trying to pursue," Chris said, as soon as it was found that all the Boers, save those lying dying or

dead, had escaped from the yard. "We should only ruin the horses, and they have done a big day's work already."

The besieged could be heard hastily removing the barricades against the door, and in two or three minutes ran out, almost bewildered at the suddenness of their relief, when they thought that nothing remained to be done but to sell their lives dearly. A few hurried words explained the position to them, and their gratitude to Chris and his party was unbounded. Their first step was to attend to the fallen Boers. Of these there were eighteen wounded and eleven killed, and as soon as all in their power had been done for the former, and they had been carried into the house, a blazing fire was lit in one of the rooms and the party all gathered there.

"Now, Mr. King," Searle said, "you are the baas of this party; what do you think had best be done?"

"I think the first thing," Chris said, "is to post half a dozen men, three or four hundred yards away, round the house. We must not run the risk of the tables being turned on us by the Boers crawling up and surprising us; they may still be hanging about in numbers. Peters, you take Harris, Bryan, and Capper, and the two Zulus, and post them round the house. The natives' ears are much sharper than yours are, and if either of them thinks he hears anything let them crawl out in that direction and reconnoitre. When I whistle, do you come in to me, leaving the others on guard, then I will tell you what we have decided upon."

The four named at once went outside, and, calling the natives, left the yard. Jack had already filled the kettles the colonists had brought with them, and placed them over the fire.

"While the tea is getting ready," Chris said, "we had better give a good feed of mealies to all the horses. How many of yours are there left?" he asked one of the colonists.

"All the twelve we had at first were unwounded this evening, but I can't say whether any of them have been hit since. The wall was too high for bullets to touch them as long as the Boers were outside, but most likely as we were firing through the window we may have hit some of them."

"I don't suppose you did so, because I fancy that directly the Boers began fighting here the horses bunched in one corner of the yard. Well, will you feed them also, and see how many are uninjured. That is a matter of importance, for our horses will scarcely be fit for work in the morning. Do you think yours may be?"

"Yes, I think so; we have only been shut up three days, and they have had a good deal of pickings, what with the beds and what was lying about in the yard before; and a good feed now will certainly set them up. What do you propose to do?"

"Well, I want in the first place to get enough of the Boer ponies in to mount us all, and in the second to overtake and cut the Boers off if possible, and lastly to rescue the cattle. Five of our party are away after the horses, but their object was to scatter them. They were to halt about five miles away, and if they heard three rifle shots at regular intervals they were to ride towards them."

"Do you want them in here? if so, I will go out and give the signal. We have taken it by turns to sleep, so we are all fairly fresh."

"Yes, I want them in, but I specially want them to collect and drive in a score of the Boer ponies."

"At daybreak we will all go," another of the farmers said, "and lend a hand."

"With this moon we ought to be able to find some of the men without waiting for daylight," Chris said. "It would be

an immense thing if we could be after them before they have got too long a start."

"It would indeed. Well, we will feed our horses at once, and by the time we have had a cup of tea they will be ready to start. If we have luck, we ought not to be away more than a couple of hours."

"It would make our success pretty well a certainty if we could get the ponies by that time," Chris said.

In less than half an hour the seven farmers started. Only one of the horses had been killed, and they rode away at a rate that showed that the others were none the worse for their three days on somewhat short rations.

"Now," Chris said, after seeing them off, "we will get a couple of hours' sleep. I wish Peters and his party could do the same, but it would not do to trust to the Boers not coming back again."

All were asleep in a few minutes, but an hour later they heard a shot fired, followed by several others. They leapt to their feet, seized their rifles, and ran out into the yard. There was, however, no repetition of the firing, and a few minutes later Peters came in and reported that the Zulus had discovered a number of Boers making their way cautiously forward. Both had fired, and some shots had been returned, but the Boers had at once drawn off.

"I don't suppose we shall hear any more of them. They hoped they might catch us asleep. Now they find that we are on watch I expect they will give up the idea and make off. It is a nuisance having been disturbed, but I am not sorry for it, for the Boers will have lost a couple of hours, and even if the horses do not come in we shall still have a chance of overtaking them. Now, Peters, you had better get forty winks; I will go out with Brown, Field, and Sankey, and relieve the three out there. I don't suppose they will come in, but they

can take a nap where they are. You need not send out when the farmers come back; we shall see them."

Chris had been nearly two hours on watch when he made out in the bright moonlight a number of horses and mounted figures going towards the house. He at once woke the sleepers and called the others in, and by the time they reached the farm some thirty unmounted ponies, followed by Carmichael's party and the farmers, came up.

"We have been longer than we expected," one of the latter said as he dismounted, "but we were lucky at last in finding this lot together in a kloof. Have you seen anything of the Boers? We thought we heard a few shots."

"Yes, they came here and tried to turn the tables on us; but we had the Zulus and some of the scouts out. When they found that we were watchful they decamped. Now, Carmichael, go in with your party and get a cup of tea."

"What! are we going to start again?" Carmichael asked rather dismally; "we were only just getting off to sleep when Willesden, who was on watch, heard three shots."

"Some of us have only had an hour's sleep, Carmichael. But there is another day's work before us, and after that you may sleep for twenty-four hours if you like."

"Oh! I suppose I can do it if the others can; still, after seventy-five miles here, five miles out, and something like five miles chasing the horses, and five miles back again, I think we have done a pretty good day's work."

"No doubt you have," Chris said, "a thundering good day's work; but a fellow is not worth calling a fellow if he can't manage to do two days' work at a stretch for once in a way. At any rate, the horses will be fresh, which is of much more importance than our being so; they have had three days' perfect rest. Now, while you are having your tea we will see about the other arrangements. Of course Mr. Searle will

stop here; he has done double the work that we have. His friends can do as they like. Naturally we shall be glad to have them with us, but that is as they choose."

"Of course we will go with you," one of the colonists said.

"Thank you! At any rate two of you had better stop with Mr. Searle. There are the wounded Boers to look after. I see there is a waggon in the yard; I should think they had better be put in that and carried to Greytown. If we recover the cattle, we will drive them down there."

None of the farmers was willing to stay, and at last they had to decide the question by lot.

"Now," Chris said, "you gentlemen know the country a great deal better than we do, and can tell us which way they are most likely to take their cattle."

"They are sure to go north, there is no other way for them to go. If the whole party were together and mounted, they might go up through Zululand; as it is, they would not venture to do that. They will cross the Tugela, I should say, between the point where the Mooi runs into it and its junction with the Buffalo, and go up through Colsie, and then either through Helpmakaar or Lazarath."

"Well, I hope we shall catch them long before they get to the Tugela."

"I expect the cattle will be somewhere near Inadi; there is some good grazing along there, and as all the loyalists have cleared off long ago they will have no fear of being disturbed."

The saddles were transferred from their own horses to the Boer ponies, and it was finally arranged that the waggon with the wounded should not start until their return. Jack and the two Zulus were left with them, and even should another party of Boers come along the six men would be able to

defend themselves till the others returned. Half an hour after the arrival of Carmichael's party they started in pursuit, and directed their course for Inadi, as it would have been useless to search for the Boers, and it was certain that these would make for the point where it had been arranged that the cattle should cross. It was some fifteen miles away, and they were confident that they would arrive there before the Boers, who, bad walkers at the best of times, and disheartened by their failure, at the loss of many of their companions and of all their horses, would not have got more than half-way by the time they started.

It was half-past two when they left, and when they approached Inadi day was breaking. They had put on their Boer hats, and knew that the men in charge of the herd would take them to be some of their own party until they were quite close. To their satisfaction they saw the herd grazing half a mile south of the village, and it was not until they were within a hundred yards of the spot where the smoke of a fire showed that the guard were posted, that they saw any movement. Then a man rose to his feet, and, looking at them earnestly, gave a shout of alarm. The others leapt up at once and ran towards their ponies; these were fifty yards away, and before they could reach them Chris and his party dashed up, rifle in hand.

"Surrender," he shouted in Dutch, "or we fire! Down with your rifles!"

Seeing that resistance was useless the Boers threw down their weapons, and in a minute were tied hand and foot with the ropes from their saddles. They were then lashed to bushes at some little distance from each other, so as to prevent their rolling together and loosening each other's cords. The natives with them had at the first alarm fled at full speed, and were already out of sight. Then the whole party rode to a ridge

a quarter of a mile back, dismounted at its foot, and crawled up to the crest. A mile away some fifty men could be seen wearily making their way on foot towards them.

"We have done quite enough in the way of fighting," Chris said, "and I should think that they have had more than enough; we will get them to surrender if we can. We will wait till they are within forty or fifty yards and then fire a few shots over their heads, and see what comes of it. We have good cover here, and they are in the open. They will know very well that there is not a chance of their getting away, for, as we have horses and they have none, we could defend any eminence we chose to occupy, and ride off to another if they were likely to take it. Besides, they would never be able to cross the river under our fire."

When the Boers were within eighty yards half a dozen rifles were discharged. They at once threw themselves on the ground.

"I will give them a chance of talking it over," Chris said, "then I will hail them."

A pause ensued, and the Boers could be heard talking excitedly together. When he thought that he had given them time enough to appreciate their condition, Chris shouted in Dutch:

"Hullo, Boers! We don't want to have to kill you all, which we could certainly do. You must see that you are at our mercy. If you choose to surrender, you may go home; if you don't, we shall let you lie there as long as you like, and shoot you down when you get on your feet. I will give you five minutes to make up your minds."

At the end of that time one of the Boers held up his rifle with a white flag tied to it.

"That is not good enough for us," Chris shouted. "That trick has been tried too often. If you surrender, you will

M 683

"ONE OF THE BOERS HELD UP HIS RIFLE WITH A WHITE FLAG TIED TO IT"

take off your bandoliers and belts and leave them and your rifles behind you, and come forward unarmed."

There was a shout of fury among the Boers as they found that their treacherous design had failed in success.

"I will give you another five minutes," Chris shouted; "and if you don't do as I tell you we shall open fire on you."

Before the time was up the Boers were seen to be taking off their bandoliers, and one by one they rose and came forward in a body without their rifles. Chris allowed them to come half-way, so that they could not, when they found themselves in superior force, run back to their arms again. He gave the word, and his party rose to their feet.

"Now," he said, as the Boers came up, "you will turn all your pockets inside out. I have not the least doubt that you are all taking off mementos of your visit here."

Indeed, the pockets of the prisoners were all bulging out. Sullenly the Boers obeyed the order. The collection was a miscellaneous one. They had between them the spoil of a dozen farms. Women's finery formed a large proportion of their loot, and was evidently intended for their wives at home. Besides this were spoons, forks, and cutlery, chimney ornaments, children's clothes, several purses, and packets of spare cartridges.

"That will do very nicely," Chris said, when it had been ascertained that all the plunder had been disgorged. "Now, gentlemen, you are at liberty to go, and I wish you a pleasant walk home. It is only about a hundred miles. Your friends with the cattle shall join you at once. I have no doubt that you will be able to obtain food from your countrymen as you go along. You are sure to find friends at all the villages, and some of you may get ponies at Helpmakaar."

Then, paying no attention to the curses and threats of the Boers, the party rode forward and collected the Boer guns,

emptied the bandoliers and belts, and then rode back to the cattle and released the four Boers with them, and, pointing to their comrades, told them to rejoin them. Then they collected the cattle, and, driving them before them, rode off. When they had gone five miles away they halted, and the farmers undertaking to keep watch by turns, the lads, throwing themselves down, were in a few minutes fast asleep.

In four hours they were roused, and continued their course till they reached the farm. Here they rested till the next morning, then at daybreak the wounded Boers were placed in a waggon; the ammunition was divided among the farmers; and the rifles taken from the Boers, and those that belonged to the killed and wounded, amounting in all to eighty-one, were, after the charges had been carefully drawn, also placed in the waggon, Chris saying, "They would be useless to us, and they may be useful to you, for they will arm all the people in Greytown; and with eighty magazine rifles you ought to be able to beat off any parties you may meet. As the cattle are all branded you will have no difficulty in returning them to their owners; as to the Boer ponies and saddles, no doubt there are many who have lost their horses who will be glad of them."

Then, after renewed expressions of gratitude from the farmers, the party separated, the colonists going south to Greytown, while the scouts rode west by the line they had come, and late that evening arrived at Chieveley. They had intended to halt after crossing the Bushman's river at Weenan, but they heard the sound of artillery and knew that Buller was again moving forward.

Their return created quite an excitement in the camp of the Maritzburg Scouts, and innumerable questions were asked.

"We have been on a little business of our own," Chris said. "Beyond the fact that it has been successful we have nothing to say. You know how strict the orders are against scouting,

and therefore I can only say that we wanted to give our horses a change of food, and have taken them three days off."

"Your horses don't look any better for the change, anyhow," one of the troopers said. "They look as if they had been worked off their legs."

"Yes, they look a little drawn, but in a couple of days they will feel the benefit of it; they were getting too fat before. Some day we may be able to tell you more about it, but just at present we feel that it is as well to keep the matter to ourselves. What has been doing here? We heard the firing; that brought us in, or we should not have been back till to-morrow."

"Nothing particular, except that we have been battering them all along the line. No move has been made yet, but the general idea is that we shall this time make a try at Hlangwane to-morrow."

"I hope we shall take it," Chris said. "We shall have a good deal more trouble about it than we should have had at the attack in December, when it was virtually in our hands, whereas now it looks stronger than any point along the line."

Chris, however, was much more communicative to Captain Brookfield, who said as he entered his tent, "Well, Chris, did you get there in time?"

"Yes, sir; we caught them as they were attacking the house at ten o'clock that night. They were too busy to notice us, and we killed eleven and wounded eighteen, and stampeded their ponies. They bolted on foot, but came back in hopes of surprising us two hours later, which I need hardly say they failed to do. They then made off for the place where the herds they had captured were waiting for them. We drove their ponies in, as our own were too much done up to go on, and intercepted the Boers close to Inadi, and made them surrender. We took their guns, ammunition, and loot from them,

and let them go. There were forty-nine of them altogether, and we did not see what we were to do with them. We could not have brought them here without the whole thing being made public, and we were certainly not disposed to escort them down to Maritzburg. They will have at least a hundred miles to tramp home. We recovered all the cattle, about two thousand head. We gave them to the farmers to find their proper owners, and thirty of the Boer horses that we captured. I dare say they will pick up some more of them; for as we were in a hurry, we only drove in as many as we wanted. We have no casualties. It could hardly be called a fight, it was a sudden surprise, and they did not stop to count us."

"Bravo! bravo, Chris! And now I suppose you are going to enlist again?"

"Yes, sir, if you will take us."

"Certainly I will. Fortunately Buller was at Frere until they moved on again yesterday, and nobody has missed your little camp as far as I know, so I don't think that there is any chance of questions being asked. I will swear you all in again if you will bring the others round."

CHAPTER XVIII

RAILWAY HILL

THERE was little talking that evening. As soon as the tents had been erected, a cup of cocoa and a biscuit taken, all turned in, and even the constant booming of the artillery and the occasional sharp crack of musketry had no effect whatever on their slumbers. Just before Chris lay down, however, an orderly told him that Captain Brookfield wished to see him.

"I have just received orders, Chris, that our brigade of cavalry is to turn out to-morrow morning to support the infantry. Hildyard, Lyttleton, and Barton are going. Their object is to carry Cingola, which is the small peak at the end of the nek extending from it to the high peak of Monte Cristo. The duty of the mounted infantry will be to clear the eastern side of the southern end of the range, and to hold the nek separating it from the highest peak, and so prevent the Boers from their main position reinforcing the defenders of the lower peak. I think that your party had better remain in camp, for after doing over seventy miles to-day they won't be fit for work to-morrow."

"We should not like to be left behind here, sir, and the hill is not very far away, so that it would not be hard work for the horses. No doubt we should be dismounted a considerable part of the day."

"Then you would rather go, Chris?"

"Much rather, sir. We should all be terribly disappointed if we could not go out the first day that there has been a chance of our doing something."

"It is always as well to be on the right side, but I hardly think so many troops will really be required; and I think it is a symptom that a serious attack will be made in a day or two on Monte Cristo and Hlangwane. You see, the possession of Cingola and Monte Cristo will take us pretty well round its flank, and I do not expect the Boers will be so much prepared there as they are in front."

An hour before daylight all were out engaged in grooming their horses, which, having received a hot mash of mealie flour directly they came in on the previous evening, looked better than could have been expected after their hard work on two days out of three. By the time they had finished, the natives had breakfast ready, and they had scarcely eaten

this when a trumpet sounded to horse. Five minutes later the mounted infantry belonging to the regular regiments and the Colonial Horse formed up, and, led by Lord Dundonald, marched north-east, followed by the three infantry brigades and some batteries of artillery. When within a couple of miles of the nek, the mounted infantry galloped forward, and selecting a spot where the ascent was gradual, pushed rapidly up the hill until they reached its brow. Here the horses were placed in a depression, and the men scattered themselves across the crest. They were but just in time, for a considerable force of Boers from Monte Cristo were hurrying along to assist the defenders of Cingola, it having now become evident to them that this was the point to which the infantry moving across the plain were making.

A brisk fire was opened as they approached, and the Boers at once stopped in surprise, for as they came along they had been unable to see that the cavalry had quitted the rest of the column, and had therefore no idea whatever that their way to Cingola was barred. As the rapid fire showed them that the nek was held in force, they did not think it prudent to advance farther, but after an exchange of fire fell back to Monte Cristo. The task of the infantry was now comparatively easy. Cingola was not held in any great force; and seeing that their retreat along the nek was cut off, and that they could not hope to resist the strong force that was approaching, the enemy contented themselves with keeping up a brisk fire for a time, and then retreated hastily down the northern face of the hill, and scattered among numerous kopjes between it and the river. Lyttleton and Hildyard's brigades occupied the peak, and Barton, with the Fusilier battalions, remained to the left of its base.

As the mounted infantry had, before opening fire, taken shelter behind bushes and rocks, there were only two or three

casualties, and they were much disappointed that the affair had been so trifling. It was afternoon now, and for the rest of the day comparative quietude reigned, although Monte Cristo threw an occasional shell on to the crest of Cingola. The mounted infantry remained all night in their position, acting as an advanced guard to the infantry; but they had orders to descend the hill before daybreak and return to Chieveley, there being no water obtainable for their horses, and their services not being required for the succeeding operations. The next morning (Sunday) a battery of field-artillery, which had been taken half-way up Cingola, began to shell Monte Cristo, and as if this had been the signal, the whole of the artillery on the plain opened a terrific fire on the entrenchments of Monte Cristo, Hlangwane, and Green Hill, which was close to Monte Cristo.

On the morning of the 18th, Lyttleton and Hildyard's brigades moved forward to storm the precipitous peak, and Barton's brigade marched against the tangled and difficult ground that surrounded Green Hill. The Queen's on the right and the Scotch Fusiliers on the left led the attack against the peak. The hillside was partly wooded, but although the smokeless powder gave little indication as to the progress the troops were making, occasional glimpses of the Boers flitting among the trees showed that these were falling back. The roar of musketry was continuous, as Hildyard's brigade and Lyttleton's were both engaged. For a short time there was a pause, and then Lyttleton's men, having gathered at the edge of a wood some couple of hundred yards from the summit, advanced with a rush up the terribly steep rocks. The Boers fired hurriedly, but their bullets flew for the most part far over the heads of the Queen's, and then, fearful of being caught by Hildyard's men, who were also rapidly coming up, they fled hastily.

The opposition had finally been trifling. The vast majority of the Boers had cleared off, and the rest, after emptying their magazines, had followed their example before the troops gained the summit, upon which a heavy cannonade was at once opened from Grobler's Hill, Fort Wylie, and other Boer positions. This, however, gradually slackened under the storm of lyddite shells with which they were pelted by the naval guns, and the important position of Hlangwane was at last secured, and no time was lost in getting up guns and preparing for a farther advance. Barton's brigade had been equally successful in their attack, and half an hour after the capture of Monte Cristo the Fusiliers crowned the summit of the wood-covered Green Hill.

The Boers' defences were now examined, and proved to be of a most formidable nature. On the south face of the hill the trenches were in tiers, line behind line. Most of them were fully six feet deep, and in many cases provided with shelter from the weather by sheets of corrugated iron, taken from the roofs of the houses in Colenso. In some cases these were supported by props, and covered with six feet of earth. These had evidently been used for sleeping and living places. The ground was strewn with straw, empty tins, fragments of food, bones, cartridge-cases, old bandoliers, and large quantities of unopened tinned food and sacks of mealie flour. Here and there were patches of dried blood, showing where the wounded by our shell had been brought in, and laid down until they could be removed to the hospital under cover of night. On the plateau the scene was similar. Here every irregularity of ground had been utilized, and long lines of trenches intersected it, showing that the Boers had intended to make a desperate resistance even after we had won our way up the hill. These were in a similar state of litter and disorder.

Although they had saved their guns, they had left behind

them large quantities of ammunition and provisions in the hurried flight, necessitated by our attack being delivered in a direction from which no danger had been apprehended. Four waggons full of ammunition had been left by them in a kloof near the river. These had been observed by the Engineers in the balloon, and their position had been signalled to the naval brigade, who, turning their guns upon them, before long succeeded in blowing them up.

When the infantry prepared for their final rush the Boers appeared, indeed, to be entirely disconcerted at an attack from an altogether unexpected direction. While for weeks they had been working incessantly to render the hill impregnable, they had prepared it only on the face against which they made sure the British infantry would dash itself. Nevertheless, in this, as in every action, the Boers, as soon as they saw that there was a risk of the position being taken, began early to make preparations for retreat. While keeping up a very heavy musketry fire on the woods through which the British infantry were advancing, they began to withdraw their guns.

The speed and skill with which on every occasion throughout the war they shifted heavy pieces of artillery from one point to another, or withdrew them altogether, was a new feature in warfare. Except when the garrison of Ladysmith, on two occasions of night sorties, surprised and destroyed three of their guns, they scarcely lost a piece either in the numerous actions during our advance to Ladysmith, or in their final retreat from that town. And similarly on the other side, of the very large number of guns employed at the fight on the Modder, at Magersfontein, and in the siege of Kimberley the whole were, with the exception of a few pieces captured when Cronje was surrounded, withdrawn in spite of the hurried evacuation of their position, a feat almost unparalleled even

in an army accompanied only by field-artillery, and extraordinary indeed in the case of works mounting heavy siege-guns.

No farther advance was made till the afternoon, when General Buller arrived on the summit of Green Hill, and, seeing that Hlangwane was not entrenched on its northern side, which was completely turned by our advance, sent Barton's brigade against it. But the loss of Monte Cristo had for the time quite taken the fight out of the Boers, and after maintaining a brisk fire for a short period, they evacuated the position as soon as the infantry neared the summit, and, hurrying down the western slope, crossed the Tugela. Three camps full of provisions, blankets, and the necessaries of Boer life fell into the hands of the captors, together with a large amount of rifle and Maxim ammunition. The place had been turned into a fortress. Trenches and stone breastworks covered all the approaches by which the Boers might look for an attack, and as the whole mountain was covered with huge boulders, they were able to withstand even the storm of lyddite shell that was poured upon them.

On the following day Hart's brigade received orders to advance towards Colenso. This was still held in force by the Boers, but was now commanded by guns that had been got up the slopes of Hlangwane, and on Tuesday morning General Hart captured the position without serious loss, the Boers suffering severely from our shrapnel fire as they retreated, some by the iron bridge and others by a ford. Thorneycroft's Mounted Infantry, which was called up in the evening, took advantage of the discovery that a drift existed there, and a squadron forded the river in spite of a scattered fire from the Boers on the opposite bank. Another portion of the colonial force occupied Fort Wylie, a redoubt that had been thrown up by our troops when they occupied Colenso, but had

been abandoned when the advance of the Boers to cut the line between Colenso and Frere forced them to retire.

The next morning Thorneycroft's regiment crossed, and, moving to the left, seized the kopjes facing Grobler's Kloof; the Boers, still suffering from the effect of their unexpected reverses, offered no resistance, but, abandoning all their camps, trenches, and redoubts, retired at once to the hill. The Scouts had followed Thorneycroft's Horse in support, and now, placing their horses under shelter in the abandoned entrenchments, prepared to act as infantry should the Boers take the offensive. This, however, they showed no intention of doing, and in the afternoon the troops who had crossed were able to examine the deserted camps. They presented very much the same appearance as those on Monte Cristo and Hlangwane. Many of them appeared to have been occupied by men of a better position, as many articles of luxury, choicer food, wearing apparel, newspapers, Bibles, fruit, and other signs of comfort littered the places; but even here dirt had reigned supreme. Although they must have been inhabited for a long time, it could be seen that no attempts had been made to clear away refuse, or to make them in any degree tidy. As was natural, the effect of the heat of the sun on scraps of food, vegetables, and refuse of all kinds caused a sickening stench, and the soldiers spent as short a time as possible over their investigations. One article which would have been found in a British camp was altogether absent from those of the enemy, and it was a joke among our troops that the only piece of soap ever captured was found in the pocket of a dead Boer, and that its wrapper was still unopened.

The strength of the position was, however, even more surprising than the state of filth; every trench was enfiladed by another, great boulders were connected by walls of massive construction, this being specially the case where guns had been

placed in position. Colenso itself had been in a similar manner rendered almost impregnable to a frontal attack, and could hardly have been captured by any assaulting force until Hlangwane had been taken.

The hills beyond the railway still covered the road bridge by their fire, and had the troops marched across it they would have suffered severely. Accordingly a pontoon train was sent through an opening in the Hlangwane range, and a bridge thrown over the Tugela north of Fort Wylie. The Dorsets, Middlesex, and Somersets crossed at once, and, ascending the kopjes, extended their line south until they were in communication with Thorneycroft's men, holding therefore the railway line along the river bank nearly half the distance between Colenso and Pieters station. Other regiments and artillery followed.

It was now six days since the advance had commenced, and for the past four fighting had been almost continuous. On Wednesday the three regiments advanced towards Grobler's Hill in order to ascertain what force was occupying it. They met with no opposition until they reached the lower slopes, nor could any Boers be seen moving. Then suddenly a heavy fire broke out from the boulders which covered the whole face of the hill, and afforded such perfect shelter that it had not been considered necessary to form entrenchments. As only a reconnaissance, and not an attack, had been ordered, the force retired, the Somersets, who were the leading regiment, having nearly a hundred casualties. The other regiments had as many more between them.

The next day a continuous fire from all the points held by the Boers showed that large reinforcements had reached them. The Lancashire Brigade, under Colonel Wynne, started at two o'clock that afternoon to carry the kopjes up the Brook Spruit, which ran in the rear of Grobler's Kloof. The Royal

Lancasters led the way, but as soon as they left the shelter of the ridges by the side of the railway they were exposed to a terrible fire, both in front and from Grobler's Kloof. The artillery on Hlangwane, and those still on the plain, endeavoured to silence the enemy's guns, but though they poured numbers of lyddite and shrapnel shells among them they were unable to do so. The Lancasters advanced with the greatest coolness up the spruit, followed by the South Lancasters. As they pressed forward they were met by a heavy rifle fire both from the kopjes in front and on the left. The Boers stuck to the hill until the Lancasters were within a hundred yards, then most of them slunk off. Not knowing this, the Lancasters lay under shelter for a few minutes until their ammunition-pouches had been replenished, then, being joined by the South Lancasters and King's Royal Rifles, they rushed to the crest.

For the past two days the Dublin Fusiliers had been lying near Colenso. They had suffered very heavily in the first attack on Potgieter's Drift, but they now volunteered to take Grobler's Hill; and this, aided with the fire of the artillery and Colonel Wynne's brigade, they did in gallant style, the Boers being evidently nervous that they might find their retreat cut off should the Lancasters advance farther up the spruit.

On Friday afternoon the Irish Brigade advanced along the line, and then turned off towards Railway Hill, a steep jagged eminence almost triangular in shape, with one angle pointing towards the river. The sides were broken with sharp ledges covered with boulders. The railway passed through this, separating the last jagged ledge from the higher portion of the hill, which rises almost precipitously. Running back several hundred yards at the base of this line was a dip full of thorn trees. This dip winds round the rear of the hill, and here there was a large Boer camp.

A little farther to the rear was another steep hill, on which the enemy's Creusot guns were now mounted. Several trenches were cut along the hillsides, and on the crest were some strong redoubts. It was a most formidable position, but as it seemed to bar all progress farther up the line, it was necessary to carry it at all costs. The mounted infantry had, after their skirmish towards Grobler's Kloof, returned to the camp, as the country was so terribly broken as to be altogether impracticable for mounted men.

On Thursday, Captain Brookfield had obtained a pass for himself and three other officers to go to Hlangwane to view the operations, but one of these being unwell, Captain Brookfield invited Chris to take his place. After inspecting the plateau, they made their way down to the left. Hearing that an attack was about to be made on Railway Hill, they clambered down until they reached a point where, seated in an open spot among the trees, they could command a view of what was passing.

"It is an awful place," Chris said, "and it seems to me almost impossible to be carried."

"It is an awful place," Captain Brookfield agreed. "This is one of the times, Chris, when one feels the advantage of belonging to a mounted corps, for without being less brave than other men, I should regard it as an order to meet certain death were I told to attack that rugged hill. Ah, there are the Irish Brigade!"

The storming party consisted of the Inniskillings, with companies of the Dublins, the Connaught Rangers, and the Imperial Light Infantry. From a building called Platelayer's House at the mouth of the spruit, to the foot of the hill, the ground was perfectly open to the point where the left face of Railway Hill rose steeply up, and across this open ground, a distance of half a mile, the assailants had to march.

"Here they come!"

As, in open order, with their rifles at the trail, the Inniskillings appeared in view, a terrible fire broke out from every ledge of Railway Hill, while the cannon joined in the roar. The guns on Hlangwane, and those on the slopes nearer the river, with Maxims and quick-firing guns, replied on our side.

"It is awful," Chris said, speaking to himself rather than to the captain who was standing beside him. "I don't think that, even at Badajos, British soldiers were ever sent on a more desperate enterprise. It looks as if nothing could live under that fire even now; what will it be when they get closer?"

Not a shot was fired by the advancing infantry in reply to the storm of bullets from the Boer marksmen. Every round of ammunition might be wanted yet, and it would only be wasted on an invisible foe. They took advantage of what little shelter could be obtained, sometimes close to the river bank, sometimes following some slight depression which afforded at least a partial protection. At last they reached a deep donga running into the river; this was crossed by a small bridge, and in passing over it they had to run the gauntlet of the Boer fire. Many fell here, but the stream of men passed on, and then at a double rushed to a sheltered spot close to the foot of the ascent, where they had been ordered to gather. Here they had a breathing space. Their real work was yet to begin, but already their casualties had been numerous. The Inniskillings alone had lost thirty-eight killed and wounded. Not a word had been spoken among the little group on the hill for the last ten minutes; they stood with tightly-pressed lips, breath coming hard, and pale faces looking at the scene. Occasionally a short gasp broke from one or other as a shell burst in the thick of the men crossing the little bridge, a cry as if they themselves had been struck. When the troops gained their shelter there was a sigh of relief.

"They will never do it," Captain Brookfield said decidedly. "It would need ten times as many men to give them a chance."

This was the opinion of them all, and they hoped even now that this was but the advance party, and that ere long they would see a far larger body of men coming up. But there were no signs of reinforcements, and at five o'clock the troops were re-formed and the advance began. They dashed forward up the hill under a heavy fire, to which the supporting line replied. The boulders afforded a certain amount of shelter, and of this the Inniskillings took every advantage, until they reached the last ledge with comparatively little loss. But the work was still before them. Leaping over, they rushed down on to the railway line. Here a wire-fence arrested their course for a moment, and many fell while getting through or over it. Then they ran across the line, passed through a fence on the other side, and dashed up the steep angle of the hill to the first trench. Hitherto the fire of the Boers had been far less destructive than might have been expected, their attention being confused and their aim flurried by the constant explosion of lyddite shell from the British batteries. They had but one eye for their assailants, the other for the guns, and as each of the heavy pieces was fired, they ducked down for shelter, only to get up again to take a hasty shot before having to hide again.

Thus, then, they were in no condition to reckon the comparatively small numbers of their assailants, and as they saw the Irishmen dashing forward, cheering loudly, with pointed bayonets, they hesitated, and then bolted up the hill to the next trench. Instead of waiting until the supports had come up for another rush, the Irishmen with a cheer dashed across the trench in hot pursuit. But the next line was far more strongly manned, and a storm of bullets swept among them.

Still, for a time they kept on, but wasting so rapidly that even the most desperate saw that it could not be done; and, turning, the survivors retreated to the trench that they had already won, while the supports fell back to the railway, both suffering heavily in the retreat. No fewer than two hundred of the Inniskillings had fallen in that desperate charge, their colonel and ten officers being either killed or wounded, while the Dublins also lost their colonel.

All through the night the trench was held sternly, in spite of repeated and desperate efforts of the Boers to dislodge its defenders. Nothing could be done for those who lay wounded on the hill above. Morning broke, and the fight still continued. At nine o'clock another desperate charge was made; but the Boers were unable to face the steady fire that was maintained by the defenders of the trench, and they again turned and ran for their shelters. Just as this attack was repulsed, Lyttleton's brigade arrived on the scene, exchanging a hearty cheer with the men who had so long borne the brunt of this terrible conflict. The Durham Light Infantry at once relieved those in the trenches, and these descended the hill for the rest that was so much needed. All that day the fighting continued, and while Lyttleton's men held to the position on Railway Hill, there was fierce fighting away to the left, where the Welsh Fusiliers and other regiments were hotly engaged. The roar of artillery and musketry never ceased all day, but towards evening white flags were hoisted on both sides, and a truce was agreed upon for twelve hours to bury the dead.

The scene of the conflict presented a terrible sight. The hillside between the two trenches was strewn with dead and wounded. The sufferings of the latter had been terrible. For six-and-thirty hours they had lain where they fell, their only relief being a little water, that in the short intervals during

the fighting some kindly Boers had crept down to give them. The truce began at four o'clock in the morning of Sunday the 25th, and the foes of the previous day mingled with each other in the sad work, conversing freely with each other. The Boers expressed their astonishment that such an attempt should ever have been made, and their stupefaction at the manner in which the Irish had pressed on through a fire in which it had seemed that no human being could have existed for a minute. When informed of the relief of Kimberley, and the fact that Cronje was hopelessly surrounded, they scoffed at the news as a fable, and were so honestly amused that it was evident they had been kept absolutely in the dark by their leaders.

Captain Brookfield and his party had remained at the look-out until darkness set in. After the first exclamation of pain and grief as they saw the attack fail, and the fearfully thinned ranks run back to shelter, there had been little said. "It was impossible from the first," Captain Brookfield sighed as they turned. "If the relief of Ladysmith depends on our carrying that hill, Ladysmith is doomed to fall."

They returned to the spot where they had left their horses in charge of two of the blacks, and rode back to Chieveley. It was a sorrowful evening. The men's hopes had risen daily as position after position had been carried, and now it seemed that once again the enterprise had hopelessly failed. On Monday there was a continuation of the lull of firing. Many of the officers in camp who were off duty rode up to examine the scene of the fight, and they were not surprised when they saw the infantry recrossing the pontoon bridge. All wore a dejected aspect, but especially the men who had fought so heroically and, as it now seemed, in vain. They sat watching until the last soldier had crossed, and then rode to the top of Hlangwane. All Chris's party had come out, and

those who had not before seen the view waited there for a couple of hours, ate some refreshment they had brought with them, discussed the difficulties that lay in the way of farther advance, and the probable point against which General Buller would next direct his attack.

"Hullo!" Chris exclaimed suddenly, "that pontoon train is not coming back to camp. Do you see, after moving to the point where it passed through this range, it has turned to the north again and not to the south. Hurrah! Buller is not going to throw up the sponge this time. The Boers have not done with us yet."

This indeed was the case. The general, seeing that Railway Hill was too strong to be carried by assault, unless with an enormous loss of life, had caused the river to be reconnoitred some distance farther up, and this had resulted in the discovery of a spot where, with some little labour, the troops could get down to the river and a pontoon bridge be again thrown. Such a spot was found by Colonel Sandbach of the Royal Engineers, and a strong working party was at once set to work to make a practicable approach. The point lay some three or four miles below Railway Hill, and the most formidable of the obstacles would therefore be turned. That night the troops crossed, and the Boers—who were in ignorance of what had been going on, the point chosen for the passage being at the bend of the river and hidden by an intervening eminence from their positions—were astonished at finding a strong force again across the river.

As soon as the news reached the camp that the army was again crossing, satisfaction took the place of the deep depression that had reigned during the past two days, and the situation was eagerly discussed. Those who at all knew the country were eagerly questioned as to the ground farther on near the line of railway. All these agreed that the hill called Pieter's

was a formidable position, almost, though not perhaps quite, as strong as Railway Hill, but that beyond it the line ran through a comparatively open country, and that if this hill could be captured the relief of Ladysmith would be ensured. The Scouts had not escaped altogether scatheless. At the reconnaissance towards Grobler's Hill, Brown, Harris, and Willesden had all been wounded, but none very seriously, although at first it was thought that Willesden's was a mortal injury, for he had been hit in the stomach. The doctors, however, assured his anxious comrades that there was every ground for hope, for very many of those who had been so injured had made a speedy recovery.

"Poor old Willesden!" Field had said as they talked it over; "it is hard that he should have been hit in the stomach, for he was a capital hand at taking care of it."

"And of ours too, Field. He has been a first-rate caterer. I do hope he will pull through it."

The lad himself had not seemed to suffer much pain, and three days later the surgeon had been able to assure his friends that as no fever had set in they had little fear of serious consequences ensuing. The boys had not been allowed to see him. Captain Brookfield, however, reported that he was going on capitally, but was in a very bad temper because he was allowed to eat nothing but a piece of bread and a sip of milk, while he declared himself desperately hungry, and capable of devouring a good-sized leg of mutton.

"I don't think you need worry about him," he said to Chris; "the doctor told me that in a fortnight he would be very likely to be about again, and none the worse for the wound, the bullet having evidently missed any vital point, in which case its passage would heal as quickly as the little wounds where the bullet enters and passes out usually do."

Harris had his arm broken just above the elbow, and Brown

a flesh wound below the hip. He was the stoutest of the party, and jokingly said, as he was carried back, that the bullet had passed through the largest amount of flesh in the company. Chris once or twice went into the hospitals with a doctor whose acquaintance he had made. They offered a strong contrast to the scene that had taken place after the battle of Elandslaagte, as in the hospitals at Chieveley and Frere everything was as admirably arranged as they would have been in one of a large town. In the daytime the sides of the marquees were lifted to allow of a free passage of air. The nurses in their neat dresses moved quietly among the patients with medicines, soups, jellies, and other refreshments ordered for them. There were books for those sufficiently convalescent to be able to read them, and those who wished to send a letter home always found one of the nurses ready to write at their dictation. By some of the bedsides stood bouquets of flowers sent by the ladies of Maritzburg, and all had an abundance of delicious fruit from the same source.

CHAPTER XIX

MAJUBA DAY

"DID you hear of that plucky action of Captain Philips, of the Royal Engineers, last night?" an officer who had just ridden in from the front asked Chris that evening.

"No; I heard that the Boers set up a tremendous musketry fire in the evening after the truce was over, but no one that I have spoken to knew what it was about."

"Well, we ourselves didn't know till next morning. The general idea was that it was a Boer scare. They thought that we were crawling up to make a night attack, and so blazed

away for all they were worth. We found out afterwards that Philips had conceived the idea that it was possible to destroy that search-light of the Boers. He had learned from prisoners that it was the last they had with them, and although we have not made any night attacks yet, it was possible we might do so in the future, and so he made up his mind to have a try to smash it up. He took with him eight blue-jackets, crawled along in the dark beyond our lines, and got in among the Boers. He had taken particular notice of points he should have to pass, boulders and so on, and he found his way there without making a blunder. There were plenty of Boers round, but no one just at the search-light. The blue-jackets all understood the working of their own search-lights; but the Boers have no electric lights, you know, and work their signals with acetylene, and so they stood on guard while Philips opened the lamp, took out the working parts, whatever they are, and shut the lamp again. Just as they had done so they heard four Boers who had been sitting talking together get up. He and his party dropped among the bushes and lay there quiet while the Boers came up to the lamp.

"'We are to keep it going to-night,' one of them said, 'for they may take it into their heads to make an attack, thinking that after having had a truce all day we shall not be expecting trouble, and they may catch us unprepared. I expect our German officer in a few minutes; he said he would be here about ten o'clock, for the rooineks are not likely to move until they think we are asleep.'

"They moved away again, and Philips and his men stole quietly off, but before they rejoined our fellows they heard a sudden shout, and in a minute a tremendous rifle fire broke out. Evidently the German had arrived and found the search-light would not act, and they concluded at once that we were marching against them, and for twenty minutes every man in

the trenches blazed away at random as fast as he could load. I should say that they must have wasted a hundred thousand cartridges. As there was no reply they began to think that they had been fooled. Our fellows were just as much puzzled at the row, and fell in, thinking that the Boers might possibly be going to attack them. However, matters quieted down, and it was not until the next morning that anyone knew what it had all been about."

"That was a plucky thing indeed," Chris said; "though, as I should hardly think we should attack at night, it may not be of much service, for the Boers have long since given up trying with their feeble flash-lights to interrupt our night signalling with Ladysmith, especially as, now the weather is finer, we can talk all day if we like with our heliograph."

Chris was just turning in when Captain Brookfield came to the entrance of his tent. "I have just heard, Chris, that the pontoon bridge has been successfully thrown across just below the cataract, and that the troops are all crossing. I just mention it to you. I cannot get away myself, but if I find you and your boys are not here in the morning, I shall say nothing about it. We certainly shall not be wanted. The orders are out, and there is no mention of our corps nor any of the mounted colonials."

"Thank you, sir! I am very much obliged." Chris went round to the tents and told the others that they must be up an hour before daybreak and be ready to start at once, as there would probably be another very big fight. Then he told the natives, who were, as usual, still talking together in their tent, that they were all going off very early, and that chocolate must be ready at daybreak, and the water-skins filled, as the horses would probably be out all day.

"Will you want anything cooked, baas?" Jack asked.

"No; we will take some tins with us. There is going to be

another big fight to-morrow; as we are all going, you can go too if you like. We shall want you for the horses. Three of you can stop with them at a time, and the others can go and see what is doing, and then change about, you know, so that you can all see something. The spare horses must have plenty of food left them, and must have a good drink before we start."

They were all astir in good time. The natives had made some hot cakes, and these they ate with their chocolate. Then they saw that the horses had a good feed, and a stock of biscuit and tinned meat for themselves was put into the saddle-bags, and when daylight broke they were across the plain and arrived at the dip in the hills through which the pontoon train had gone. Knowing where the cataract was, they were able to calculate pretty accurately where they had best dismount. This they did in a small clump of trees. Then each took a tin of meat and a couple of pounds of biscuit in his pocket.

"Now," Chris said to the natives, "you had better all stay here quietly till you hear firing begin; then, Jack, you can go with the two Zulus. You can stay and look on till the middle of the day. When the sun is at its highest you must come back and let Japhet and the Swazis go. At sunset you must all be here again, and wait till we come. Perhaps we may be back sooner, and if so we shall ride away at once; and those of you who are away when we start must go back to camp at once if you find that the horses have gone when you get here. Now let's be off."

They made their way up the hills, well pleased that there were enough trees and bushes to shield them from observation. The roar of artillery and the rattle of musketry had been going on for some time, but not with the fury that marked the commencement of an attack. A fortnight before it would have seemed to them that a great battle was in progress, but

by this time they were accustomed to the almost incessant fire, and knew that although the cannonade was heavier than usual, no actual fighting was going on. They met no officers as they went along, nor did they expect to do so, for none of these would be able to leave their regiments, as even were these not included in the force told off to assault, they might be called upon later in the day. At last they reached the top of a hill whose face sloped steeply down to the river, and from here they could obtain a view of the Boer position, and of the line of railway up and down.

To the right was Pieter's station, with a steep hill of the same name rising close to it. To the left of this was another strongly-posted hill, while beyond it was the scene of the fighting on Friday and Saturday, Railway Hill, which had been rechristened Hart's Hill, in honour of the commander of the brigade that had fought so valiantly. It was evident that at these three points the whole of the fighting force of the Boers were gathered. A heavy rifle fire was being kept up against the British infantry, whose passage of the river had now been discovered, and who were lying crouched behind boulders and other shelter.

They now saw that the guns had all been brought forward during the night, had taken up commanding positions, and were pouring a terrible fire into the enemy's encampment at a distance of little over a mile. The enemy's guns were replying, but at this short range the naval guns were able to fire point-blank, and their shells ripped the defences erected to shelter the Boer camp into fragments, and carried destruction everywhere.

On a kopje about a quarter of a mile behind and above them General Buller and his staff had taken up their position, and the lads kept themselves well within the trees to avoid observation.

"See, Chris, there are some of our fellows creeping along by the side of the river. They must be hidden from the sight of the Boers. I expect they will be the first to begin."

All their glasses were turned upon the column of men. They were two battalions of the 6th Brigade and the Dublin Fusiliers, and these, under General Barton's command, made their way down the river bank for a mile and a half. Then the lads saw that they were leaving the river and crossing the line of railway.

"They have evidently gone down there," Sankey said, "because that spur just this side must hide them from the Boers on Pieter's Hill."

The column were lost sight of for upwards of an hour, and then they appeared on the opposite crest, five hundred feet above the line; then they were lost sight of again as they passed beyond the crest.

"That is a splendid move!" Chris exclaimed. "By working round there they will gain the top of Pieter's Hill, and come down like a thunderbolt upon the Boers."

The roar of artillery continued unabated. Clouds of yellowish-brown smoke floated over the Boer entrenchments, lit up occasionally by a vivid flash of a bursting lyddite shell. So terrible was the bombardment that the rifle fire of the Boers against the troops crouching behind their shelters was feeble and intermittent, as they dared not emerge from their shelter-places to lift a head above their line of trenches. It was a long time before Barton's troops were again seen. Doubtless they had orders to wait for a time when they had gained their desired position, in order to allow the bombardment to do its work, and prepare the way for the assault of the other positions by the fourth and eleventh brigades. It was not, indeed, until the afternoon that the lads saw Barton's brigade sweeping along to the attack of Pieter's Hill.

The Boers saw them now, and could be seen leaping out of their entrenchments, regardless of the redoubled fire of the artillery now concentrated upon them, and climbing up the hill to oppose this unexpected attack. But before they could gather in sufficient numbers the British were upon them, keeping up a terrible fire as they advanced. The Boers, however, fought sturdily. Many, indeed, had already begun to make their way along the southern face of the hill, either to join their comrades on the hill between Pieter's and Hart's, or to escape up the valleys between them, and so make their way to Bulwana, where a large force was still encamped.

"We may as well help," Chris said; "the general can but blow us up."

Delighted to be able to do even a little towards the success of the day, the party at once picked up their rifles lying beside them.

"It is about a thousand yards, I should say, to the middle of the hill. Take steady aim and try and pick them off as they leave their trenches."

The firing began at once slowly and steadily, and occasionally there was an exclamation of satisfaction when a bullet found its mark. Five minutes later a dismounted staff-officer came down to the trees behind them.

"What men are these?" he asked; "the general wishes to know."

"We are the Johannesburg Scouts," Chris said.

"Are you in command, sir?"

"Yes."

"Then, will you please to accompany me at once to the general."

On arriving at the spot where the general was standing a little in advance of his staff, the latter at once recognized Chris. "Oh, it is you, Mr. King!" he said. "I was afraid

some of the men had left their stations. And what are you doing here?"

"We are trying to lend a hand to the troops over there, and as we are all good shots, I think we are being of some assistance."

"You had no right to leave the camp, sir. I suppose you call this independent service?"

"I do, general. I hope that we are affording some help here, and we should not be doing any good in camp; and as we have been nearly out of it through all this fighting, and there were no orders for the corps to do anything to-day, we thought we might be of use."

"You did wrong, sir," the general said, his face relaxing into a smile at the lad's defence of himself. "Well, as you are there, you may as well stop."

"Thank you, sir!" Chris said, saluting, and then hurried off to rejoin his comrades.

"He is a plucky boy," the general said to his staff. "I heard the other day—though not officially, so I was not obliged to take notice of it—that he, with the twenty lads with him, rode out to a place seventy miles away, and rescued some farmers who were besieged by Boers, defeated their assailants, killed and wounded more than their own number, made the rest of them, still double their own strength, lay down their arms, and recaptured nearly two thousand head of cattle they had driven off. The news came to me from the mayor of Maritzburg, who had heard it from a friend who had ridden in from Greytown. He wrote to me expressing his admiration at the exploit. I sent privately to their captain and questioned him about it, intending to reprimand him severely for letting them go; but he said that they had all resigned, as they had a right to do, for they are all sons of gentlemen, and draw no pay or provisions, and that he had therefore no con-

trol whatever over their actions after they left camp. I told him not to say anything about his having seen me, for that, as they had returned, I should be obliged to take notice of the matter if it came to be talked about. That young fellow who came here is the one who, with three of the others, tried to blow up the bridge at Komati-poort. He could not do that, but he played havoc with a large store of rifles, ammunition, and six or eight guns. After that I could not very well scold him." And he again turned his glass on the opposite hill.

Here the fighting was almost over, and in a very short time all resistance had ceased. Some of the Boer guns on the next hill had now been turned round, and opened upon the captured position, which took their own in flank. An aide-de-camp was sent off to order some of the guns to be taken, if possible, up to the top of Pieter's Hill, and after immense exertions two batteries were placed there. As soon as this was accomplished, orders were sent for the rest of the infantry to advance. General Warren was in command, and the fourth brigade, under Colonel Norcott, and the eleventh, under Colonel Kitchener, now moved forward, taking advantage of what shelter could be obtained as they advanced. At the same time a strong force of colonial infantry moved to the right to attack the Boer trenches farther up the line of railway, and were soon hotly engaged. The defenders of Hart's Hill, and the position between that and Pieter's, opened a heavy fire as soon as the British infantry showed themselves; but their morale was so shaken by the terrific bombardment to which they had been subjected, by the loss of Pieter's Hill, and by the rifle fire now opened by its captors, that their fire was singularly ineffective. Many men dropped, but the loss was comparatively much smaller than that suffered by the Irish division when moving across the open on the 23rd.

Taking advantage of every shelter, the troops moved steadily forward, maintaining a heavy fire whenever they did so, and winning their way steadily. Colonel Kitchener's Brigade pressed on towards Hart's Hill, which on the side by which they now attacked was far less formidable than that against which the Irish had dashed themselves. It had never entered the Boers' minds that they would be attacked from this side, and their most formidable entrenchments had all been placed to resist an assault from Colenso. Arrived at its foot, the troops were in comparative shelter among the boulders that covered the slopes. Foot by foot they made their way upwards, until at last they gathered for a final assault, and then with a loud cheer scrambled up the last slope and with fixed bayonets drove the Boers in headlong flight. A similar success attended the eleventh brigade, who just at sunset carried the centre position, and a mighty cheer broke out all along the line at the capture of what all felt to be the last serious obstacle to their advance to Ladysmith. On the right, the Colonial troops had driven the Boers in front of them for nearly three miles, capturing entrenchment after entrenchment, until they arrived at Nelthorpe station.

The three camps of the Boers contained an even larger amount of spoil than had been discovered in those of Monte Cristo and Hlangwane. It seemed that they had been perfectly confident that the positions were impregnable, and had accumulated stores sufficient for a prolonged residence. It was evident, too, that the wealthier men with them had preferred this situation to the more exposed camps on the summit of the hills. The amount of provisions and stores of all kinds was large. Great quantities of rifle ammunition were found in every trench. Clothes of a superior kind proved that their owners had been residents of Johannesburg or Pretoria, and of a different class altogether from the farm-labourers and herdsmen

who formed the majority of the Boer army. The haste with which they had fled, when to their astonishment they discovered that the British attack could not be repulsed, was shown by the fact that a good many watches were found on bed-places and rough tables where they had been left when the Boers rushed to arms, and in the hurry of flight had been forgotten.

The number of rifles that had been thrown away was very large. Among the dead bodies found were those of two women, one quite young and the other over sixty. It was notorious that women had more than once been seen in the firing ranks of the Boers, and there were reports that Amazon corps were in course of formation in the Transvaal, the Boers, perhaps, remembering how sturdily the women of Haarlem had fought against the Spaniards in defence of their city.

So complete had been the panic evinced by the headlong flight of the enemy that the general opinion was that it would be some time before they would again attempt a stand against our men, and that unless any entrenchments higher up the valley were held by men who had not witnessed what had taken place, and were commanded by leaders of the most determined character, Ladysmith would almost certainly be relieved within a couple of days, and the rescuing army would be thus rewarded for its toils and sacrifices.

In a state of the wildest delight the lads returned to the spot where they had left their horses, where they found that Japhet and the two Swazis had arrived just before them. They and the Zulus were exhibiting their intense satisfaction at the defeat of the Boers by a wild war-dance. The party rode fast back to camp, for their spirits did not admit of a leisurely pace, and they left the natives to follow them more deliberately. The news had already been received in camp

by the return of officers who witnessed the scene from a point near to that which the lads had attained, and its occupants were in a frenzy of delight. The Colonial corps were especially jubilant. This was the anniversary of Majuba Hill, the blackest in the history of the Colony, and one that the Boers in the Transvaal and Orange State always celebrated with great rejoicings, to the humiliation of the British colonists. Now that disgrace was wiped out. A position even stronger than that of Majuba, fortified with enormous pains, defended by artillery and by thousands of Boers, had been captured by a British force, and although it was as yet unknown in camp, the old reverse had been doubly avenged by the surrender on that day of Cronje and his army.

Late that evening an order was issued that Lord Dundonald with a squadron of Lancers and some Colonial corps, in which the Maritzburg Scouts were included, were to reconnoitre along the line of railway. All felt sure that no serious opposition was likely to be met with; the defeat of the Boers had been so crushing and complete that assuredly few of the fugitives would be found willing to again encounter the terrible artillery fire, followed by the irresistible onslaught of the infantry. That evening, in spite of the scarcity of wood, bonfires were lighted, and the Scouts gathered round them. Every bottle of spirits and wine that remained in the camp was broached, and a most joyous evening was spent.

"I shall be able to breathe freely," one of the colonists, a man from Johannesburg, said, "on Majuba Day in future. I have made a point for years, whenever I wanted to do any business in Natal, to put it off till that date, so that I could get out of the Transvaal. When I could not manage it, I shut myself up and stopped in bed all day, though even there I used to grind my teeth when I heard the brutes shouting and singing in the streets. Still, to me it was not half such a

humiliation as surrender day. The one was a piece of carelessness, a military blunder, no doubt; the other was a national disgrace. And though I saw Majuba myself, it did not affect me half as much as did the abject backing down of the British Government after they had collected an army at Newcastle in readiness to avenge Majuba. We could not believe the news when it came. The fury of the troops was unbounded, and I would not have given a farthing for the lives of any of the men who were the authors of the surrender, had they been in the camp that day."

"What were you doing there?" Chris asked.

"I had a farm near Newcastle at that time, and two of my waggons had been taken up by the military for transport purposes. I was not on the hill, as you may suppose, or I might not be here to tell the story. I went forward with Colley. It was just the same then as it was at the beginning here. There were plenty of colonists ready to take up arms, but the military authorities would have none of them; they could manage the thing themselves without any aid from civilians. They knew that the natives had over and over again beaten the Boers, and what natives could do would be merely child's play to British soldiers. Sir George Colley was a brave officer, and I believe had proved himself a skilful one, but he knew nothing whatever of the Boer style of fighting, while we colonists understood it perfectly, and could match them at their own game. As it turned out, the British soldiers on that occasion did not, and it made all the difference. If Sir George Colley had accepted a few hundreds of us, who knew the Boers well, as scouts and skirmishers, the affair would have turned out very differently; for, as you know, they did not succeed through the whole affair in taking one of the places held by our colonists.

"Well, we started from Newcastle, and the blundering

began from the first. It was but twenty-five miles to Laing's Nek. At the time we started there was not a Boer there, for they were doubtful which line we should advance by. That twenty-five miles could have been done in a day, and there we should have been with our difficulties at an end; the baggage and stores could have come up in two or three days, and then another advance could have been made. Instead of that, six days were wasted in going over that miserable bit of ground. The Boers, of course, took advantage of the time we had given them to prepare and entrench Laing's Nek. I don't think that troubled the military authorities at all; an entrenchment thrown up by farmers and peasants could be but a worthless affair, and would not for a moment check the advance of British infantry. The consequence of all this was that we got the licking we deserved. Their entrenchment at the crest of the ridge was held by something like three thousand men. Colley had but three hundred and seventy infantry, a force in itself utterly inadequate for the work in hand. But, seeing some parties of Boer horsemen riding about, he thought it necessary to leave a strong body for the defence of his baggage, and accordingly sent only about two hundred and fifty men forward to attack the place.

"Well, we among the waggons hadn't a doubt how it was going to turn out. The one battery with us opened fire upon the entrenchment, but you who know what their entrenchments are will guess that there was little damage done; and when the soldiers went up the hill the Boers held their fire until they were close, and then literally swept them away, and, leaping over the entrenchments, took many of them prisoners. None would have got away at all if a few mounted infantry, who had managed to get up the Nek at another point, hadn't charged down and so enabled the survivors to escape. One

hundred and eighty out of the two hundred and fifty were killed or taken prisoners. Colley at once fell back four miles. The Boers on their part, making sure that they had got him safe, sent a strong force round, and this planted itself on the road between him and Newcastle, but before they did so some small reinforcements joined us. Three or four days passed, and then we Colonials quite made up our mind that there was nothing for it but surrender. Colley determined at last to try and open the road back, and with about two hundred and fifty men, with four cannon—two of them mountain guns—moved out. Some sixty soldiers were left on a commanding spot to cover the passage of the Ingogo.

"As soon as the force under Colley had got to the opposite crest of the ravine through which the river runs, they were attacked in great force. They took shelter among the boulders, and fought as bravely as it was possible for men to fight. The guns, however, were useless, for in half an hour every officer, man and horse, was killed or wounded. However, the Boers could not pluck up courage to make a rush, and the little force held on till it was dark, by which time more than two-thirds of them were killed or wounded. A lot of rain had fallen, the Boers thought that the Ingogo could not be forded, and so, believing they would have no trouble in finishing the little force in the morning, they were careless. Colley, however, sent down and found that the water had not risen so high as to make it impossible to pass, and in the darkness, covered by the blinding rain that was falling, he and the survivors moved quietly off, crossed the river, picked up the party left on the eminence commanding it, and returned to camp.

"It was certain now that unless succoured our fate was sealed, but fortunately Evelyn Wood came up to Newcastle with a column that had been pressing forward from the sea. Colley, of course, ought to have waited for him to arrive

before he moved at all, and if he had done so, things might have turned out very differently. But he made the mistake of despising the Boers, and thinking that it was nothing but a walk over. When they heard that the column had reached Newcastle the Boers cleared off the line of communication, and Colley rode into Newcastle and saw Wood. We felt that we were well out of a bad business; and were sure that the Boers, who are no good in attack, however well they fight behind shelter, would not venture to attack us, and that even if they did so we could keep them off till help came. But Colley could not let well alone. Instead of waiting till Wood came up and joined him, he thought he might make a good stroke on his own account, and so retrieve the two defeats he had suffered; so when the 92nd Regiment came up he determined to seize Majuba Hill.

"It was well worth seizing, for it completely commanded the Boers' position on Laing's Nek, and had the whole force come up the Boers must have fallen back directly it was captured. However, Colley decided not to wait, and with about five hundred and fifty men and officers he started at night. The hill was only four miles off as the crow flies, but the ground was frightfully cut up, and it was not until after six hours of tremendous work that they reached the summit. Two hundred men were left at the bottom of the hill to keep open communications with the camp.

From a hill close to the camp we could make out what was going on. Soon after daybreak we saw a party of mounted men ride towards the hill, where they usually stationed videttes. They were fired at as they approached, and directly a turmoil could be seen on Laing's Nek. Waggons were inspanned, and we thought at first that they were all going to move off, but this was not so. They were only getting ready to go if they failed to recapture the hill, and in

a short time we could see all their force moving towards it. Well, from where we were it seemed that the force on Majuba could have kept a hundred thousand Boers at bay, and so they ought to have done.

"For a time the Boers did not make much progress. With glasses puffs of smoke could be made out all along the crest, and among the rocks below. The firing began in earnest at seven, and between twelve and one the Boer fire had ceased and ours died away. We thought it was all over, and went back to our waggons again. Soon after one o'clock there was a sudden outburst, and the men with glasses observed that the Boers were close up to the top of the hill. A few minutes later it was on the plateau itself that the firing was going on.

Colley had not known the Boers. No doubt his men were completely done up with their six hours' toil among the hills and six hours' fighting, and I don't think a tenth of them were ever engaged, for Colley thought it was impossible that the position could be stormed; so he only kept a handful of men at the edge of the plateau and allowed the rest to lie down and sleep. Certainly that was the case when the Boers, who had been crawling up among the rocks and bushes, made their rush.

"Well, you all know what happened. The few men on the edge were cut down at once. The Boers dashed forward, keeping up a heavy fire. Our fellows jumped up, but numbers were shot down as they did so, and, in spite of the efforts of their officers, a panic seized them. They had far better rifles than the Boers, and had they been steady might still have driven them back; but only a few of them ever fired a shot, and but one Boer was killed and five wounded; while on our side eight officers, among them Colley himself, were killed, and seven taken prisoners. Eighty-six men were killed, one hundred and twenty-five wounded, fifty-one taken prisoners,

and two missing. A few managed to make their way down the hill, and joined the party that had been left there at the bottom.

"These were also attacked, but beat off the Boers, and, maintaining perfect order, fought their way back to camp. You can imagine the consternation there was when the hideous business became known. We fell back at once to Newcastle, and mightily lucky we thought ourselves to get there safely. Fresh troops came up, and we were on the point of advancing again, confident that, after the lesson the Boers had given us, things could be managed better. Suddenly, like a thunderclap, the news came that the British Government had surrendered to the Boers, given up everything, abandoned the colonists, who had so bravely defended their towns, to their fate; and, with the exception of making a proviso that the natives should be well treated—but which, as nothing was ever done to enforce it, meant allowing the Boers to enslave and ill-treat them as they had done before—and another proviso, maintaining the purely nominal supremacy of the Queen, the treaty was simply an entire and abject surrender.

"There is not a colonist who, since that time, has not known what must come of it, and that sooner or later the question whether the Dutch or the British were to be masters of the Cape would have to be fought out. But none of us dreamt that the British Government would allow the Boers to import hundreds of thousands of rifles, two or three hundred cannon, and enormous stores of ammunition in readiness for the encounter. Well, they have done it, and we have seen the consequences. Natal has been overrun, and a considerable portion of Cape Colony. We have lost here some ten thousand men, and half as many on the other side, and we may lose as many more before the business is finished. And all this because a handful of miserable curs at home twenty years ago were ready to betray

the honour of England, in order that they might make matters smooth for themselves at home."

Just as the story came to an end the assembly blew in the camp of the Scouts, and on running in the men found that Captain Brookfield had received an order to mount at once and ride to join the cavalry under Lord Dundonald at the front, as a reconnaissance was to be made in the morning. Five minutes later all were in the saddle and trotting across the plain towards Colenso, as they were to follow the line of railway up.

CHAPTER XX

LADYSMITH

IT was exciting work as the mounted horse under Lord Dundonald rode along. As far as could be seen from the various points in our possession the passage was clear, but experience had taught how the Boers would lie quiet, even when in large numbers, while scouts were passing close to them. At Colenso Colonel Long had sent two mounted men on ahead of his battery. They had been permitted to pass within a hundred yards of thousands of Boers among the bushes on the river bank, and had even crossed the bridge and returned without a rifle shot being fired or a Boer showing his head. And it was on their report that there were apparently no Boers in the neighbourhood that the batteries were pushed forward into the fatal trap prepared for them. So Chris and his companions, at the rear of the colonial cavalry, trotted along, ready at a moment's notice to swing round their rifles for instant action. They watched every stone and clump of bushes on the slopes of the valley for any foe that might be

lurking there, and who at any moment might pour out a rain of bullets into the column.

Very few words were spoken on the way, the tension was too great. They knew that Ladysmith had telegraphed that the Boers appeared to be everywhere falling back. But a few thousands of their best fighting men might have remained to strike one terrible blow at the troops who in open fight had shown themselves their superiors, and had driven them from position after position that they believed impregnable. However, as one after another of the spots where an ambuscade would be likely to be laid were passed, and there were still no signs of the enemy, the keenness of the watch began to abate, and the set expression of the faces to relax. Then as the hills receded and the valley opened before them a pleasurable excitement succeeded the grim expectation of battle. The task that had proved so hard was indeed fulfilled; the Boers were gone, and the siege of Ladysmith was at an end. As they emerged from the valley into the plain in which Ladysmith is situated, there was an insensible increase of speed; men talked joyously together, scarcely waiting for replies; the horses seemed to catch the infection of their riders' spirits, and the pennons of the Lancers in front to flutter more gaily. Onward they swept, cantering now until they approached the town.

Then men could be seen running towards the road; from every house they poured out, men and women, some waving hats and handkerchiefs, some too much overpowered by their feelings for outward demonstrations. As the columns reached this point they broke into a walk, and answered with ringing cheers the fainter but no less hearty hurrahs of those they came to rescue; and yet the troopers themselves were scarcely less affected than the crowd that pressed round to shake them by the hand. They had known that provisions were nearly

exhausted in the city, and that for some time past all had been on short rations; but they had not dreamt of anything like this. It seemed to them that they were surrounded by a population of skeletons, haggard and worn, almost too weak to drag themselves along, almost too feeble to shout, their clothes in rags, their eyes unnaturally large, their hands nerveless, their utterances broken by sobs. They realized for the first time how terrible had been the privations, how great the sufferings of the garrison and people of Ladysmith. For the soldiers were there as well as the civilians. There was little military in their appearance; there was no uniformity in their dress, save that all were alike ragged, stained, and destitute of colour.

Could their rescuers have seen them, themselves unseen, a few days earlier, they would have been even more shocked. Then the listlessness brought about by hope deferred, and of late almost the extinction of hope, weakness caused by disease and famine, had been supreme; and had the Boers had any idea of the state to which they were reduced, a renewal of the attack of the 6th of January could hardly have failed of success. The last few days, however, had revived their hopes. They had learned by the ever-nearing roar of the cannon that progress was being made, and for the past four days had from elevated points near the town been able to make out the movements of our troops on the positions they had captured. They had seen the Boers breaking up their camps, carrying off their stores either by waggon across the western passes or by the trains from Modder Spruit. They had seen the cannon being withdrawn from their positions on the hills, and felt that their deliverance was at hand.

Through an ever-increasing crowd the column moved on. From barrack and hospital, from dwelling-house and the dug-out shelter-caves on the railway bank people flocked up.

Sir George White and his staff, the mayor, and the town guards, every officer and soldier, joined in the greeting. But no stay was made. After but a few minutes' talk with Sir George White, Lord Dundonald gave the order, and the cavalry moved forward, and as soon as they were free from the crowd trotted on at a rapid pace in hopes of overtaking the retiring Boers, and glad that the scene to which they had looked forward with such pleasant expectations was at an end. There had not been a dry eye among them. None could have witnessed the sobbing women, the men down whose cheeks the tears streamed uncontrolledly, and have remained himself unmoved.

"It is terrible," Chris said to Sankey, who was riding next to him. "I could not have imagined anything so dreadful as their appearance. I did not realize what it was like when, two or three months before I left Johannesburg, I read in Motley's book about the war in the Netherlands of the state of things in Leyden when the Prince of Orange burst his way through to their rescue, and of the terrible appearance of the starved inhabitants, but now I can quite understand how awfully bad it was. It must have been even worse then. Here there were some rations distributed—little enough, but some. There the people had nothing but the weeds they gathered, and boiled down with the scraps they could pick up. There they died in hundreds of actual starvation; it cannot have been quite so bad here. But as we see, though there has been just enough food to keep life together, that has been all, and it has been from disease brought on by famine, and not by famine itself, that they have died. Then, too, shells were always falling among them, and at any moment they might be attacked. I expect that anxiety and fever have had as much to do with it as hunger."

"Yes, Chris. You know, when we were grumbling sometimes at not being employed in the fighting, we have wished

M 683

THE RELIEF OF LADYSMITH

we had stopped in Ladysmith, and gone through the siege there; now, one can thank God that one did not do so. We have pictured to ourselves everyone actively employed, the vigilance at all the outposts, the skirmishing with the Boers who crept up too closely, the excitement of repelling their attack, and all that sort of thing. It is all very good to read about, but now we know what it really meant one sees that we were a pack of fools to have wished to be there."

"Yes; I suppose one never knows what is good for one, Sankey. Now as I look back I think that we have been extraordinarily fortunate. We have had some fights, just in the way we had expected, and, thanks principally to our being so well mounted, we have done very well. We have lived well; I don't say we have not had a certain amount of discomfort, but of course we expected that. What I am most pleased at is that not one of us has been killed, and only a few of us wounded, the only serious one being Willesden, and he is fairly on the way to recovery. For boys we have done a very good share, and I expect that now we have driven the Boers back here, and Kimberley has been relieved, and there is a tremendous force gathering on that side, it will soon be over."

"Yes, I think with you, Chris. And I fancy that the others are all beginning to long for the end of it. I should say that those whose people have gone to England may stop on for a bit, but the rest of us will go to our friends at Durban or the Cape, at any rate for a time, till we see how things go. We know that Lord Roberts has got Cronje surrounded and shut up. I expect that is one of the reasons that the Boers have been moving from here. The Free Staters will certainly wish to get back to defend Bloemfontein, and the Transvaal people must feel that it is no use stopping here when their own country will be shortly invaded."

"Yes; I expect that is the reason for their shutting up as

suddenly as they have done after fighting so hard for the first five or six days of our advance."

On arriving at Modder Spruit it was found that the last train had left an hour before; they pushed on, however, until a smart fire from a hill in front of them, which was evidently held in force, broke out suddenly, and two cannon from another eminence joined in. Having thus discovered that the Boers were not entirely evacuating the country, but intending to defend the Biggarsberg, at any rate until a strong force came up, Lord Dundonald returned to Ladysmith. In the afternoon General Buller rode over attended by only one or two of the staff. He stayed but a very short time, to learn from General White the state of affairs, and then returned.

"Do you think that we shall pursue at once, sir?" Chris asked Captain Brookfield.

"Not at once, Chris. Practically, as you see, there is not a soldier here fit to carry arms, nor a horse fit for work, and I should say that it will be a month before General Buller can reckon upon any assistance from the garrison. As to his own army, I expect he will keep the main portion round Chieveley. No doubt he will bring the greater part if not all the garrison of Ladysmith back to Frere and Estcourt, both to get them out of the pestilential air here and for convenience of feeding them. The civilian population will leave, of course, as soon as they possibly can. I should think that Buller will leave in garrison here an infantry brigade, part of the cavalry, and two or three batteries, and this, with the sick who cannot be moved, will be about as much as our transport will be able to manage until the railway bridge is repaired and the line put in running order. Till that is done there is no possibility of a general advance; and indeed there will have to be a great accumulation of stores here, as this will then become our base instead of Chieveley.

"No doubt a great deal will depend on how things are going on the other side. Now that Roberts has as good as captured Cronje and his force he will of course advance to Bloemfontein and occupy it. He will then be no more able to advance farther than Buller can—in fact, less able. Our line of railway is secured, and we can be fed by it; but at present we have not crossed the Orange River from the south, and the railway between that and Bloemfontein is in the hands of the Boers, and we know that they have blown up the bridges across the river. Until these are restored, and the line secure in our hands, Roberts's army will have to live on the stores that they have brought with them. Then the work of forming a base depot from the coast will begin, and it needs something enormous in the way of provisions and carriage to supply an army of sixty or seventy thousand men, all of whom must as they advance be fed from Bloemfontein.

"As long as he is stationary there it is likely enough that the bulk of Joubert's army will cling to Natal, knowing well enough that before we shall be in a condition to move forward they can entrench their positions on the Biggarsberg and the Drakenberg until they are quite as formidable as those we have been knocking our heads against. I should not be at all surprised if it is a couple of months before Roberts is in a position to advance. Of course at present we have no idea what the plans are, but likely enough at least half the force here may be sent down to Durban, and then by water to East London, and from there to Bloemfontein by rail. It would be ridiculous for us to renew the sort of fighting we have been doing when the enemy are sure to clear out when Roberts crosses the Vaal, and Natal be thus freed without any further loss of life. Possibly the troops may not be sent round by sea, but will remain here until Roberts gets as far as Kroonstadt. Then, no doubt, a division will be sent down through

Bethlehem to Harrismith, and so open Van Reenen's Pass, in which case the troops from here can go up by train to Bethlehem. At any rate, I am afraid that most of us will remain here for at least two months.

"You see, most of the colonial irregulars were enlisted for only three months, and that is up already, and no doubt a great many of them will not extend their time, and I don't suppose the military authorities will want them to do so. There is no doubt that while mounted men were invaluable in the fighting in Cape Colony, and will be so in the Orange Free State, they are of very little use in this mountainous country in the north of Natal—they are so many more mouths to be fed, man and beast, without any corresponding advantage. They have done splendidly where they have had a chance, and the Imperial Light Horse have suffered heavily, but as a whole I think that we should have been more useful as infantry than as mounted men. Infinitely more useful if, instead of being kept at the head-quarters of the army as we have been, for no possible reason that anyone can see, we had all been scattered over the country to the east, in which case we should have kept the marauding Boers from wandering about, should have saved hundreds and hundreds of loyal farmers from being ruined, and the loss of many thousands of cattle and horses, which will have to be paid for after the war is over. I do not think that there is a single colonist who is not of opinion that the way in which we have been kept inactive from the beginning of the war, instead of being employed, as irregular cavalry should have been, in protecting the country, preventing the Boers from drawing supplies, and forcing them to keep in a body as our own troops have done, has been a stupendous mistake."

Chris repeated this conversation to his comrades. "I think," he said, "that if there is no chance of doing anything for

another two or three months, we might as well break up. I have no doubt a good many of the Colonials will re-enlist. Numbers of them are working men, either from Johannesburg or belonging to Natal; they would find it very difficult to get work here, and the five shillings a day pay is therefore of the greatest importance to them. But it is different with us. We don't draw pay, we simply agreed to band ourselves together to have an opportunity of paying out the Boers for their treatment of us. At the time we agreed to that, we had no idea that they would invade Natal. Of course that was an additional inducement to us to fight. As loyalists, and capable of bearing arms, it would have been our duty, even if we had no personal feeling in the matter, to enlist to help to clear the country of the enemy who invaded it. Now that Ladysmith is rescued and there are certainly enough troops in South Africa to finish the business up, I do not see that it is our duty to continue our service. Anyhow, I have pretty well made up my mind to resign and go round to Cape Town. There I am almost sure to find my mother, and perhaps my father, for we know that they have expelled almost all the English remaining about the mines, and he may have been among them."

"I agree with you heartily," Sankey said. "At any rate, I should vote for our breaking up for the present. It will be beastly for us to have to stop here doing nothing for another month or two, and then perhaps, when Buller moves forward to join Roberts, to be told that the colonial force will no longer be required."

Twelve of the others expressed similar opinions. The friends of the eight who did not do so had returned to England. Carmichael was one of these. "Well," he said after a pause, "I do not say that you are not quite right, but I have no one to go to here. My people went home as soon as they reached Durban. If I were to join them I might hear when I

landed that the war was just over, and that they had either started to come back again, or were on the point of doing so. I was born out here, and have never seen any of my relations in Scotland. Though I should like very much to spend a few months in the old country, it would not be worth while going home for so short a time; for I am sure my father will hurry back to his work at the mines as soon as Johannesburg is taken by us. I fancy all those who have not spoken are in about the same situation that I am."

There was a murmur of assent. "I don't say," he went on, "that I should care, any more than you do, to stop here for the next two months. The smell of dead horses and things is enough to make one ill. The water of the river is poisonous, for we know the Boers used to throw their dead animals in it on purpose. So I shall go down to Maritzburg and wire to my people where I am, and ask for orders. There remains, Willesden said the other day, still about £80 apiece at the bank, and I expect we shall get as much for the horses as we gave for them; so that we who have no friends here could live very comfortably for two or three months, or have enough to pay our passage home in case they send for us. I shall tell them to telegraph, so in a week after sending off my wire I shall get an answer."

The others who had no friends in South Africa expressed their intention of doing the same.

"I don't think we need bother about the horses," Chris said; "being such good animals, I have no doubt that there are plenty of officers in the cavalry regiments here who will be glad to buy them as remounts for the money we gave for them. That would save us all the trouble of getting them down by train to Maritzburg and selling them there. Well, then, as there are no dissentients, I will tell Captain Brookfield what we have settled."

"I quite agree with you," the officer said when Chris had told him of their intentions. "In the first place, it would be a serious waste of time for you to remain here. Still, that is of comparatively little consequence, but I do think that it would be a grievous pity for you to risk your lives further. You have done wonderfully good service. You have had an experience that you will look back upon with satisfaction all your lives. You have done your duty, and more than your duty. You have before you useful lives, and have amply shown that in whatever position you may be placed you will be a credit to yourselves and your friends. Therefore, Chris, I think in every respect your decision is right. It will be some relief to me, for I tell you frankly, when you started on that expedition to Komati, and the other day, when you all rode off to that farm, I felt that it would probably be my duty to write to some of your parents to tell them of your deaths. Therefore, by all means give me your resignations. I dare say that a good many of the men in my own and other corps will be leaving also; and in that case those who remain will, I should think, be formed into one strong regiment, which will be of a good deal more use than half a dozen small corps."

It was agreed among the party that as they had decided to go they might as well go at once.

"I hear," Chris said, "that General Buller is going to make a formal entry here on Saturday, and that the garrison will line the road. I don't know whether Dundonald's brigade will have anything to do with it; but if it does, Brookfield will certainly like to make a good show. So until that is over I won't do anything about the horses."

On the day appointed the garrison turned out to receive the general and the troops who had struggled so long and gallantly to effect their rescue, and the Devons, Gloucesters, Rifles,

Leicesters, Manchesters, Liverpools, sappers, artillerymen, and the Naval Brigade marched out from their camps and lined the road as far as the railway-station, where the remnant of the cavalry brigade were drawn up. At eleven o'clock Sir George White, Sir Archibald Hunter, and Colonel Duff and his staff rode up and took their place in the front of the shattered tower of the town-hall. Here, too, Captain Lambton and many other officers took their place. Not far from these were a few score of civilians who had not shared in the general exodus that had been going on from the day on which the town was relieved, but had delayed their departure in order to witness the historical scene.

At last the head of the column was seen approaching. Lord Dundonald's men had ridden down on the previous day, and the mounted Colonial Volunteers had now the honour of forming the general's escort. They led the way, and after them came General Buller with his escort. The Dublin Fusiliers were placed at the head of the column in acknowledgment of the gallantry displayed by them in every fight; then came the men of Warren's, Lyttleton's, and Barton's brigades, with their artillery. Great indeed was the contrast between the sturdy, bronzed, and well-fed soldiers who cheered as they marched, many of them carrying their helmets on their bayonets, and the lines of emaciated men through whom they passed. These cheered too, but their voices sounded strange and thin, and many, indeed, were too much overcome by weakness and emotion to be able to add their voices to the shouts. The enthusiasm of the troops rose to the highest when they passed a group of women and children, who, with streaming eyes, greeted them as they passed.

The pipes of the Highlanders and the beating of drums added to the roar of sound. The contrast between the dress of rescuers and rescued was as great as their personal appear-

ance. Sir George White's men had of late had but little work, and had prepared for the occasion to the best of their power, as if for a review at Aldershot. They had done what they could. Their khaki suits had been washed and scrubbed until, though discoloured, they were scrupulously clean. The belts, accoutrements, and rifles had all been rubbed up and scoured. On the other hand, the uniforms of regiments that marched in were travel-stained, begrimed with the dust of battle and the mud of bivouac, until their original hue had entirely disappeared. They looked as if they had first been dragged through thorn bushes and then been given a mud-bath.

Captain Lambton rode forward to meet the sailors of the *Terrible* with the guns that had done such service, followed by the howitzers which had almost equally contributed to the final success of the operations. He was loudly cheered by the sailors, and the heartiest greetings were exchanged between him and their officers. Both in attack and defence the Naval Brigade had performed inestimable services.

Behind the column came a large body of men in civilian dress. Their appearance was as unkempt as that of the troops, but among these there was no approach to military order, and yet their heroism had been in no way inferior to that of the troops. These were the stretcher-bearers, who had in every fight carried on their work of mercy under the heaviest fire, and that without the excitement that nerves soldiers to face danger. Many of them had fallen while so engaged, but this had in no way unnerved their companions, who had not only carried on the work during daylight, but had often laboured all night until the last wounded man had been found and carried down to the hospital. When the names of the heroes of the force that relieved Ladysmith are recounted those of the stretcher-bearers are worthy of a place among them.

After the troops had been dismissed and matters had settled

down a little, Chris went over to the camp of the cavalry brigade, and spoke to the first officer he met. "I have come across, sir," he said, "to ask if any of you wish to buy remounts. The party to which I belong have twenty-five horses; they are exceptionally good animals, and cost us sixty pounds apiece last October. We furnished our own equipment. As we are all sons of gentlemen at Johannesburg, we did not much mind what we paid. Anyhow, we are ready to sell them at the price we gave for them."

"We all want remounts badly enough," the officer said. "Will you come in with me to the colonel?"

Entering the mess tent, where the colonel and several officers were standing talking, Chris's guide introduced him to them, and repeated the offer he had made. "Well, at any rate, Leslie," the colonel said, "you and Mainwaring may as well go down and look at the horses; it would certainly be a comfort to get remounts, for more than half of our chargers are gone, and the rest are skeletons. I can't ask you, Mr. King, if you would like to take anything to drink. I suppose it will be another ten days before we are in a position to be able to offer even the smallest approach to hospitality."

"I quite understand that, sir," Chris said. "In that respect we have been nearly as badly off at Chieveley. We have had plenty to eat and drink, but a cup of tea or chocolate has been the only refreshment we have been in a position to offer to a visitor, for the line has been so fully occupied with government transport that it has been next to impossible to get up any private stores. I am afraid that very little in that way can be brought up here until the bridge is repaired and the line in working order, for it is as much as the transport will be able to do to bring food enough from Chieveley for the troops and people here."

The two officers were more than satisfied with the appearance

of the horses. On their report all their comrades went down, and eleven of the animals were at once taken; a visit to the camps of two other regiments resulted in the sale of the remainder. None of the officers was able to pay in gold, as the paymaster's department had not a coin left, though small payments were made to the men until nearly the end of the siege. Chris, however, readily accepted their drafts and cheques, as these could be paid into the bank at Maritzburg.

"That is all done," he said to his friends. "Now we will get rid of our remaining stores which the men brought up yesterday. I propose that instead of selling them we divide them into three and send them down to the three cavalry messes. I am sorry we have not a few bottles of spirits left, but the tea, and chocolate, and sugar, and so on, will be very welcome to them."

The six natives carried the things down, and brought back with them notes of warm thankfulness from the colonels.

"How about our saddles, Chris?"

"We can take them with us to Maritzburg. We can hand over the kettles and so on, and the waterproof sheets, to Brookfield's men who remain here, and the blankets can be given to the natives when we get there."

The next day, after a hearty farewell from Captain Brookfield and their comrades, who sent them off with a ringing cheer, the party started, marching by the side of one of the waggons that had brought up stores; in this they placed their saddles and blankets. When they arrived at Chieveley they had no difficulty in getting a place in a covered truck. In this they travelled to Maritzburg. Here they stayed for three or four days; then, after making a handsome present in addition to what they had promised to the natives, and further gladdening their hearts by giving them their blankets, Chris and those who were going down said good-bye to Carmichael and his

party, with hopes that they would all meet again at Johannesburg before long. Three or four whose friends had remained at Durban stayed there, the rest took passage together for Cape Town.

At Maritzburg Chris had found a letter awaiting him from his mother, saying that his father had a fortnight before joined her there, as the Boers had commandeered the mines and had ordered him to leave, as he would not work them for their benefit and so provide funds for the support of the Boer army. She said that they intended to leave at once for England, and that he was to follow them when he gave up his work with the army. He therefore, with Field, Brown, and Capper, continued the voyage straight on to England, and joined his parents in London, where he enjoyed a well-earned rest, his pleasure being only marred by the necessity for telling the story of his adventures again and again to the relations and friends of his parents.

THE END

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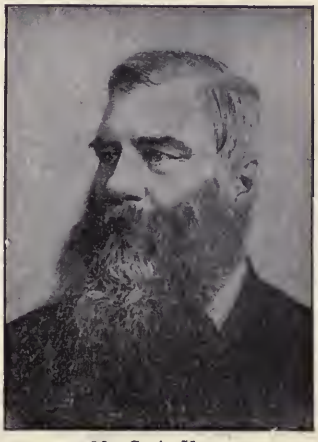

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